Writings From a War Zone
'Somewhere in the Middle East' 1940-1942

DESERT DIGGERS

David Mitchelhill-Green

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I dedicate this book to the memory of the Desert Diggers, Australian men and women of the 2nd AIF who served in North Africa during the Second World War.

ABBREVIATIONS

AASC	Australian Army Service Corps
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
‘ack ack’	anti-aircraft gun
ADC	Aide-de-Camp
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
AWL	Absent without leave
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DAK	*Deutsches Afrikakorps* (German Africa Corps)
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
DSM	Distinguished Service Medal
DSO	Distinguished Service Order
GSO	General Staff Officer
GSW	gunshot wound
HQ	headquarters
ICS	International Correspondence Schools
NCO	non-commissioned officer
POW	prisoner of war
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer
RN	Royal Navy
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment
SIW	self-inflicted wound
USAAF	United States Army Air Force

VC	Victoria Cross

INTRODUCTION

'I might say that I am now "somewhere" in the Middle East'

– Private Percy Vyner,
a driver with the 2/4th Field Ambulance.[1]

Every Australian soldier in the Second World War was gifted a copy of *The Australian Soldiers' Pocket Book*, a small ready reference full of useful information, from the Laws and Customs of War to a soldier's conduct overseas or a list of helpful Arabic or Japanese words. Among the many tips and recommendations, such as 'pay your way, don't cadge' and 'all the world's brains are not under your own hat – so go easy on your criticism of others' was the simple reminder: 'Don't forget to write home.'[2] Excerpts from Diggers' letters, woven together through a narrative of events, form the basis of this book. Together they tell the story of Australia's participation in the North African campaign 1940–1942.

The Desert Diggers' writings excerpted in this book are primarily drawn from wartime diaries or letters published in the multitude of rural (and city) newspapers then in operation. Rural and local newspapers of the time, such as the wonderfully titled *Don Dorrigo Gazette and Guy Fawkes Advocate*, tended to have closer, more parochial relationship with readers than their larger metropolitan counterparts.[3] As a conduit of local news, soldiers' letters – having passed the censor's pen and an editor's eye – were a regular feature. Mr J. C. Reeve from Lindenow (Vic.), as an example, shared a letter from his son, 31-year-old Private Eric Reeve (2/23rd Battalion), telling, in part, of his experience inside Tobruk.

During the day all was quiet as neither side could show a head with the slightest degree of safety, and most of the night there would be bursts of machine-gun fire crossing the positions on the off chance of hitting someone moving about. Rations and ammunition had to be carried to the

posts at night over a distance of about 110 yards, and all were pleased when the job was done ... I was almost blown out of [a hospital] bed by the bombs during an air raid. A wonderful job was done by the doctors and orderlies as hurriedly dropped bombs often landed in the hospital area, but very little damage was done when it was realised what could and might have happened ...[4]

The welfare of local lads serving in the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was similarly communicated. The *Dandenong Journal*, as another illustration, reported rosily on Sergeant Roy Selleck (also from 2/23rd Battalion) and his 'extensive injuries'. A well-known former Spring Vale footballer, Selleck was injured in July 1942 – 'one of his arms was broken in two places, his collarbone is broken, he received shrapnel wounds in the chest and [a] bullet through the liver. Apart from that he is all right!'[5] While many of these regional mastheads closed in the postwar period, they leave us an exceptional (digitised) legacy.

In our twenty-first century world of instantaneous electronic communication, it may be difficult to comprehend the importance of hand-penned correspondence during the war. Letter writing, perhaps a lost art today, was the primary means of contact between servicemen and loved ones back home. Letters were composed whenever possible – an opportune moment before battle, a more conducive environment behind the front lines, a hospital bed. Writing from inside besieged Tobruk, 31-year-old Private Hubert Lang (2/43rd Battalion), a single farmer from Yongala (SA), offers one example. 'As I am writing this letter, I hear the Hun planes overhead and the guns shooting. I must have a look – nothing doing; all gone over.' (Sadly, Lang died on 5 May 1942 from second and third degree burns when a 'hydro-burner which he was in the process of using caught fire.'[6])

Army regulations naturally swayed what could or could not be written: for example, 'It is permissible to state "I am in Palestine" but NOT "We are in Palestine" or to make any other reference to unit movement.' Soldiers could 'say that they have been in the front line, but no details or incidents of our own or enemy activity must be mentioned.' Breaching such regulations, or 'committing an act to the prejudice of good order and military discipline', could bring fines and/ or detention for those charged.[7] Fortunately for us, many Diggers' letters arrived home replete with pencilled portraits of their service in the Middle East; this writing holds an

immediacy lost, perhaps distorted, in later memoirs. Their firsthand accounts offer a matchless insight into their courage, privations, mateship, sense of humour, trauma and losses amid the bloody realities of war. In one such letter, Private Richard Kelly (2/28th Battalion), a Western Australian sheep station employee, described Private Stan Booth rescuing a comrade under enemy fire.

Stan Booth did a nice bit of work some time ago. He and another chap brought in a wounded cobber quite a long way under machine-gun fire. As far as Stan was concerned, they may as well have been barrows around a wool store and dodging the boss at the same time.[8]

Recruits, in the main, were not highly educated. Those evaluated as needing attention because they were deemed 'educationally backward' were doubtless more common than those who had completed a full secondary education. Illiterates were two to three times more common than university graduates. Indeed, within the demographic snapshot presented in this book, 'labouring' appears as one of the most common occupations.[9] With this in mind, Gunner Edwin 'George' Edwards (2/1st Anti-Tank Regiment) observed firsthand that a Digger's prose was generally more pithy than phonemic.

In the writing room one chap was asking another how to spell the word 'conscientious'. Neither of them knew, so they decided to put 'fair dinkum' instead. 'Pinched it' also found its way into the letter in place of 'acquired'.[10]

For families and friends awaiting the postman in Australia, a soldier's letter delivered a measure of comfort, albeit fleetingly at times. After receiving a cable from his Albury parents bluntly asking 'state condition of health', their son, an AIF sergeant, replied, impressing on them 'that this war business is quite a dangerous game, and you mustn't worry about me or my whereabouts. I want you to look the facts in the face and don't worry.'[11]

Disembarking in Egypt, Private Edward 'Ted' Boxer (2/48th Battalion), a part-Aboriginal farmer from Penong (SA) felt 'safer now I'm on land.'[12] Boxer, as we will read, lost a leg in battle several months afterwards.

Escaping from his German captors during the siege of Tobruk and re-joining his unit, Corporal Allan Hempel (2/24th Battalion), a 19-year-old

tractor driver, recounted his lucky flight to his Albury (NSW) grandmother. 'Tucker and water was the main trouble', he explained. 'We used to sneak up to the German trucks at night, "rat" the boxes if there were in any in them and drain the radiator.' Touched by the 'little mounds, each with a cross and a tin hat', behind the front line upon his return, Hempel shared that 'it kind of gets you down when you pass them by, as you know that one of your cobbers is lying there.' (Hempel died two months later from wounds sustained in combat.)[13]

Soldiers commonly penned condolence letters to families of the fallen, extolling their mates' virtues. Driver Ron Moyle recounted the tragic death of (Melbourne butcher) Driver Fred Wapling, 'the best friend and cobber I ever had.'

Fred had been out on a trip for the two previous days and was cleaning his rifle when I left him. He had the magazine removed from it, and I might add here that the rifle, when examined sometime later was faulty, as it had a broken ejector spring and I think this was largely the cause of the accident. In the course of the cleaning of it, nobody knows how, it went off and Fred was shot. I can assure you that he felt no pain, as he was unconscious all the time ... He lived for about half an hour ... This letter may appear to you to be rather rambling, but I just cannot put my thoughts on paper. I understand just how hard it must be for you to realise he has passed on, as I cannot realise it myself.[14]

The rigors of desert life were a standard topic. 'We are camped in the Western Desert', Private Laurence Cowling (2/17th Battalion) informed his parents. 'Here it is nothing for the temperature to hover between 120 and 128 degrees [49 to 53°C] (shade temperature).'[15]

'We hadn't had a wash for two days, hadn't shaved for a fortnight and our clothes, even to our boots and socks hadn't been off since we went out', Private Allan Ball (2/5th Field Ambulance) recounted. 'The meals were just enough to keep us going.'[16]

Special meals were cherished. Corporal Alan Coe (2/24th Battalion), a farm labourer from Balliang (Vic.), praised 'our company cooks, living up to a great reputation.' Prior to entering battle at El Alamein, they 'sent us up an excellent hot meal, which included a bonzer plum pudding and custard.

After the meal we (the infantry) got into our harness and set off for our start lines, well out in no-man's land.'[17]

Self-censorship might dilute or remove disturbing subject matter, yet many letters offer candid and forthright descriptions. 'Imagine us, dirty, unshaven, haggard men, in a dreadful wilderness', a Digger detailed after a funeral service at Tobruk.

There is a minute's silence as we stood to attention in memory of our fallen comrades – one man had lost a brother, most of us had lost a cobber; but the Salvo [Salvation Army officer] gave us a cheery little talk, and believe me, Mother, I went away a much happier man than before.[18]

Embellishment, conversely, could slur or sour the truth. A Taree newspaper, for example, carried a private's (disingenuous) letter in May 1941, detailing an incident when troops retrieved enemy airmen from a downed aircraft. Dressing an injured flier's wound, this individual claimed,

there was a report of a firearm, and I was knocked over. I stumbled up and the boys bandaged my leg. We searched the man I had been attending and found, a Colt 44 Derringer pistol with two chambers ... My cobber had put his bayonet through him before he had a chance to fire the second one ... The dirty cow died before the ambulance came. The bullet entered just above my knee, drilled through the knee joint and lodged in the muscle.[19]

Investigating this serviceman's record decades later, however, sheds light on a sequence of hospitalisations in Palestine and Egypt before his evacuation in March 1941 due to a self-inflicted bullet wound. Subsequently deemed to be 'permanently unfit for service' by a medical board, the private's right leg was amputated below the knee. He was discharged from the Army in June 1942.[20] Every attempt, accordingly, has been made to review and cross reference the individuals mentioned in this book through their wartime service records held by the National Archives of Australia and the Department of Veterans' Affairs Nominal Rolls. My apologies in advance for any errors that may have occurred.

Bolstering morale, letters from home were as indispensable to a soldier as his rifle and bayonet. 'Mail day is a wonderful day for all', Sister Mona Prindable from Coffs Harbour wrote.[21] 'Sitting in the sun outside my [Tobruk] dugout', Lieutenant Phillip Ferrier (2/43rd Battalion) shared the

importance of mail: ‘Letters are the only enjoyment we have here, and it is tough on the lads when the mails are held up.’[22] Or worse. ‘Words just about fail me in writing this letter’, an AIF captain began in a letter to his wife.

I’ve written practically every day to you for the past month, and today we all lined up to see the mail plane (a big bomber) go over on its way to Alexandria with at least a fortnight’s mail aboard. Well, it got over our lines all right, and was just heading out to sea when over came a couple of Messerschmitts and chased it: the result was a foregone conclusion. They emptied everything they had into it and after about five minutes it caught fire and dived direct to earth; so goodbye to the five poor chaps aboard and all our mail ... To see that plane crash into the sea was the worst medicine we’ve experienced. We are still holding our own, but it is a hell of a job.[23]

Predictably, the army postman was ‘the most popular man in the desert’. He was a ‘man of infinite resource and high training’, *Gippsland Times* told its readers:

he must have regular physical training to make him as hard as nails against the day when marauding armoured car patrols or paratroops may make his beat a hot spot. He does regular practice with rifle, light machine gun, and grenade. He must study the elements of field combat tactics and their technique, of camouflage and concealment, of anti-gas measures, first aid, hygiene and sanitation, of map reading and vehicle driving and maintenance.[24]

A Reuters correspondent described a night-time visit to Tobruk’s front line in a ration truck. Arriving at a perimeter defence post, he watched as infantry ‘armed with plates and mugs’ and ‘keen as Oliver Twist’ lined up for supper. Hearing mail had also arrived, ‘they immediately dropped their hardware and fell eagerly upon the letters’, posted a fortnight earlier in Brisbane or Sydney.[25] Marvelling at the service, Melbourne’s *Australasian* found the desert postal service handling 200 bags of mail a day, ‘calling at the farthest sunbaked outposts, leaving letters, newspapers, parcels. Its reward? – smiles’.[26] ‘You should see the effect when they are distributed’, Private Kenneth Jolliffe (2/2nd Field Workshops), a Burnie (Tas.) electrician exclaimed.[27]

But not every letter carried a greeting from home, especially after Imperial Japanese aggression threatened Australia. While part of the AIF was brought home, as we will read, the 9th Division remained in the Middle East to defend Egypt. These Diggers, as a consequence, were maligned in some quarters for remaining abroad. 'Don't you think your place is here in Australia looking after your children instead of protecting Arab children and other foreign people', one letter censured.[28] Speaking of another Digger, an officer recently returned from the Middle East in early 1942 told of him receiving 'a letter from his fiancée' breaking off their engagement.

The girl ... told him that she was not prepared to marry a coward and that she would become engaged anew to some man who was willing to fight for his country at home.[29]

Other men opened reproachful mail to find a white feather, a hateful symbol of cowardice, 'the act of a lunatic', Lieutenant Arthur Roden Cutler VC blasted. 'It would be hard to find a body of troops anywhere in the world to equal these Australians', came Cutler's riposte.

Every one of them wants to come back and help defend his own country. It is not their fault that they are unable to do so. I would remind these white feather specialists that these men they are reviling could quite easily have lived on [at] home in luxury, patronising dance halls, race tracks and sport arenas. Instead, they had the guts to leave the homes they loved and go overseas to fight the enemy on his own ground.[30]

In mocking indifference, Driver Terrence 'Terry' Toomey (AASC) had no objection to the pair of white feathers he was mailed from the Sydney GPO, 'particularly as more of them would go to good to make a good mattress in the sand. Still, I wish the sender had added the address, as I like to reply to all correspondence.'[31]

* * *

A few notes on language and geography. Though it may be offensive to some today, the term 'British' will be used in its contemporary context to denote Commonwealth and Empire troops – who outnumbered British-born troops for much of the North African Campaign – were drawn from the Antipodes, India and South Africa. Specific formations have been identified

by their country of origin. Terms of racial abuse reflect the vocabulary, standards and attitudes of the period. They are not condoned by the author. Ranks stated were those at the time of writing. In keeping with the time, Imperial measurements will be used: 1 yard = 0.91 metres; 1 mile = 1.6 kilometres.

Australia's land fighting force during the Second World War was essentially composed of two separate armies: the 2nd Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the Citizen Military Forces (CMF or Militia). Men volunteering in the AIF would serve for an indefinite time period in any location. Their service numbers, for example NX1343, denoted the state of enlistment; in this instance 'N' stands for NSW, while the 'X' signifies a soldier of the AIF.

* * *

In celebration of their townsmen's triumph at Tobruk in 1941, Albury's *Border Morning Mail* surmised: 'No single pen will ever record the real history of how the "desert rats" withstood the horrors of such a long siege. That will have to come from the men who were there.'[32] With this in mind, it is my hope that the Desert Diggers' writings will help us grasp and appreciate their role in defeating Italian and German forces in North Africa (1940–1942) while preserving their experience of war.

David Mitchelhill-Green
2024

CHAPTER ONE

Menzies – ‘Australia is also at war’

Twenty-one years after the guns had fallen silent on the Western Front, Europe was again gripped by war. Hostilities (following earlier Nazi aggression) opened on 1 September 1939, when Adolf Hitler marched into Poland. Two days later Britain’s prime minster, Neville Chamberlain, declared war on Germany. Robert Menzies followed suit, announcing that Australia, a Dominion of the British Empire, was also at war. Anxious family members gathered around wireless sets, listening closely to the prime minister’s imposing evening address. ‘Fellow Australians’, he began, ‘it is my melancholy duty to inform you officially, that in consequence of a persistence by Germany’s invasion of Poland, Great Britain has declared war upon her, and as a result Australia is also at war … we must at all costs win.’[1] ‘The die is cast’, Melbourne’s *Age* ventured, ‘What may be the greatest mass tragedy in the world’s history has commenced.’[2]

Unlike the outpouring of patriotic fervour in 1914, this time it was different. Absent was the fervent flag-waving or obvious enthusiasm for war.[3] Vivid memories of the First World War and the Great Depression were still raw for many older Australians, a Goulburn newspaper affirming ‘to-day we at least know war for what it is, an ugly, horrible thing’.[4] ‘Few were surprised at the dramatic announcement’, Kalgoorlie’s *Miner* informed its readership, ‘but the reaction after the long tension caused women in many homes to break down.’[5] This was not to say support for Britain was waning, for as Melbourne’s *Argus* announced, the call to support Britain would be answered ‘with all the energy of a young, productive, and virile people. Australia will fulfil every obligation entailed by her free and equal

partnership in the privileges, responsibilities, and destinies of the British Commonwealth of Nations.'[6]

Federal Parliament next sat on 6 September. Sitting mute regarding Australia's entry into war, Opposition Leader John Curtin responded with his Party's stand – to 'do all that is possible to safeguard Australia', at the same time maintaining 'the integrity of the British Commonwealth.' While a question mark hung over Imperial Japanese intentions, one commentator questioned how this new war would be fought, foreseeing infantry as only minor players on a larger mechanised stage. Conjecture also existed whether an early peace settlement would be negotiated, leaving Hitler to hold his gains.

Menzies subsequently announced on 15 September that a volunteer force of 20,000 men, sufficient for a single infantry division and auxiliary units, would be raised for service locally or overseas as circumstances permitted. With the militia already fielding fifteen infantry brigades, the new division would draw a brigade from New South Wales, another from Victoria and a third from the smaller states, numbered respectively – 16th, 17th and 18th. An estimated six months would be needed for basic training plus a further six before the new formation was ready to deploy.[7] Building upon the tradition of the First Australian Imperial Force (1st AIF), which had five divisions, the new division was named the 6th Australian Division. Three additional divisions – the 7th, 8th and 9th – would follow in time. The prefix '2/' would distinguish individual battalions from militia forces and First World War predecessors, for example, the Victorian 2/5th Battalion and South Australian 2/10th Battalion.

We should remember that a division (on both sides) was an army's primary tactical formation. Dominion armies were aligned with the British model: An infantry division comprised three brigades, each containing (initially four then) three battalions of between 750 to 850 men. A battalion was further broken down into sub-units – a company contained 120 to 130 men, a platoon 30 to 37, and a section nine to eleven. Together with divisional headquarters, an intelligence section and a mechanised reconnaissance regiment, each brigade was supported by a field regiment of artillery, a field company of engineers, a field ambulance and various service units including signals, a hygiene section, a mobile veterinary section and a provost (police) company. All up, a division would number

some 17,000 men, though few formations were ever at their correct 'establishment' strength.[8] In terms of leadership, a major general oversaw a division, a brigadier (general) commanded a brigade, a lieutenant colonel headed a battalion, a captain or a major led a company, and a lieutenant led a platoon, with either a sergeant or a corporal in charge of a section.

The 2nd AIF, Minister for Defence Brigadier Geoffrey Street outlined, would retain its identity under a newly appointed commander, Major-General Sir Thomas Blamey.

The men of the Second AIF wear their own uniform with its distinguishing marks, the jacket made famous by the First AIF, and the characteristic Australian slouch hat. They will use made-in-Australia rifles and made-in-Australia Vickers machine-guns. The only thing about them which will not be made in Australia will be the reputation they will make for themselves overseas.[9]

AIF recruitment window display at Georges in Collins Street, Melbourne. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria.)

Quite unlike the 'white heat enthusiasm' of August 1914, recruiting at Sydney's Victoria Barracks was 'steady rather than spectacular'. Nobody had to jostle their way to the recruiting office. A more stringent vetting process now applied, in contrast to the time when the 'military had flung

open the doors of the recruiting tents.' Men employed in certain 'key' occupations, numbering in the thousands, were advised not to apply at this time.[10]

After driving over 170 miles to his nearest recruiting office, Lindsay Long, a single man from Goodooga (NSW), joined the handful of men of 'all description' waiting outside. Entering a 'long and sombre hall', it was Long's turn to face the selection panel: two men sitting in the centre at a long table, one in plain clothes, the second in uniform.

'Name?' he asked. 'Age?' 'Twenty-nine.' 'Occupation?' 'Overseer.' The military man gave a quick look at the man opposite and then at me. 'Don't speak so loud', he said. 'Do you want to join this army?' 'Well, I'm not a fanatic, but I've come a long way. Yes, I suppose I do.' 'Well, you're in a reserved occupation. If you want to get in, you'd better give your occupation as something else.' He spoke in a low voice so that the man in the plain clothes did not hear … 'Put my occupation as bookkeeper', I said.[11]

(Lindsay Long later served in the 2/3rd Battalion. He was awarded the Military Medal and discharged in October 1945.)

Age limits narrowed recruits to between 20 and 35 years of age. Men under 21 (in theory) required written consent from both parents.[12] Eighteen-year-old Leo 'Terry' Rowen's parents in Streaky Bay (South Australia) were therefore surprised when a letter arrived from the Wayville AIF camp advising of their son's successful examination results. Reporting on Rowen's reification, the local daily trumpeted the 'spontaneous response of the gallant young men of Australia to the nation's call to arms', as an 'inspiration and a great credit to the whole country.'[13] Not to be deterred, minors across the country clamoured to enlist. 'Many well-built lads under seventeen are declaring themselves over eighteen and presenting letters which they say are from their parents', a spokesman from Victoria Barracks (NSW) acknowledged in June 1940. 'Despite our vigilance, some are accepted. Then parents demand their discharges. We appreciate the patriotism of the youngsters, but it seriously disrupts our organisation.'[14]

Confessing in due course to be only 14, a boy presenting at a Brisbane recruiting depot was 'bitterly disappointed' when told he would not be accepted.[15] Just shy of his sixteenth birthday, Alan Smith of Brompton Park

(SA) had left home in 1940, his whereabouts unknown. Eight months later his parents learned of his journey on foot from Adelaide to Melbourne and that he was training with the army at Seymour. Serving in the 6th Division, Smith was later wounded in the battle for Bardia and in the fighting in Greece.[16]

Fifteen-year-old Edwin Days, described as a 'butcher boy well known for his cheery whistle', disappeared shortly before his birthday on Easter Saturday 1940. 'He just didn't come home', his mother said. A year later, having enlisted in New South Wales on 2 May under an assumed name, Robert Summers, and given his age as 22, Day found himself in Tobruk (2/13th Battalion) – the hottest spot in the Middle East.[17]

Adelaide's North Terrace recruiting depot received perhaps the most poignant offer to serve, via a letter addressed to 'The Recruiting Officer'. Penned by a Normanville boy, it read:

I am 9 years of age and I want to enlist to help our British Empire. I have French blood in me. I am going to buy five war bonds to help win the war. Mum and Dad said I am too young, but I am asking you could I join. If I can, let me know. From John Beasley.[18]

On the opposing end of the age spectrum, men up to 70 also stepped up (vainly) to enlist.

Recruits (in theory) needed to pass a minimum height requirement of at least 5 feet 6 inches (167.6 cm); those under 5 feet 4 inches (162.56cm) were still examined, with their papers retained for possible future selection. Twenty-eight-year-old Edwin 'George' Edwards, a Sydney golf course greenkeeper, 'was nearly knocked back for being half an inch too short, but eventually got through.'[19] A Queensland recruit, measuring '6-foot 4-inch high in his stockinged feet', presented at a Cairns depot, prompting the local *Post* to claim: 'the type of men is getting better as recruiting continues.'[20] One of several renowned athletes in the 18th Brigade, Sergeant Charles 'Ted' Pickrang, a Māori heavyweight professional boxer (and Rugby Union player for New Zealand), was in training with 'a fine body of troops' in the Hunter Valley. Described as 'almost 6 feet and built in proportion', Pickrang would become one of the AIF's first casualties in Greece.[21] German General Erwin Rommel later watched with interest as a group of Australian prisoners were marched past him outside Tobruk in

1941: ‘immensely big and powerful men, who without question represented an élite formation’. All volunteers, often labourers or farm hands, they represented the ‘cream of the country’s manhood’.[22]

But as Wagga Wagga’s *Daily Advertiser* protested, the imposed minimum height was hindering enlistment, possibly even combat performance.

> … a number of Australian VCs and many other Diggers who won high decorations in the Great War could not have passed the physical standards now being imposed on recruits … In all States there is a long waiting list of men of excellent physique who have been rejected because they are not quite tall enough. While uniformly tall men look excellent on parade, Australia’s expeditionary force will deliver its moral effect on the battlefield and not on the parade ground. Army doctors state that the comparatively small man is just as good a potential soldier as the tall man. In trench warfare the small man has many advantages, while as a general rule the squarely built type stands up better to the rigors of campaigning than the lanky type. But these shorter men need not despair; their chance will undoubtedly come.[23]

Chest in, stand straight. Would-be soldiers are measured for height. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Medical standards, available publicly, also narrowed eligibility. An eyesight examination required volunteers to read minute type on the seventh line of a test card at 20 feet. Should a candidate fail, he would repeat the letters on line five with one eye and line two with the other. Several test cards were on hand to prevent a letter sequence being memorised and whispered to others waiting in line.[24] Upon passing preliminary medical examinations, would-be recruits faced a second review by a physician and a surgeon. Chest x-rays screened for consumption (tuberculosis). All men were cautioned post-screening not to dispose of their businesses or undertake final arrangements for leaving civilian life until notified of their x-ray result.[25]

Curiously, doctors were ‘puzzled’ why fewer candidates in Queensland were rejected due to heart disease in comparison to the southern states. Dr

H. G. Wallace (State Senior Medical Officer) attributed this anomaly to Queenslanders being a ‘selected race’. In his opinion:

The State was populated by immigrants from New South Wales and Victoria, and those who will pull up their roots and go to a new land are generally of a more hardy and vigorous type than those who stay behind.[26]

Another doctor concluded the differences between states were due simply to conflicting criteria.

Medical inspections for AIF volunteers. Note the eye chart on the wall. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Dental standards were generally woeful. Only 3 percent of the 6,000 men of the New South Wales 16th Brigade, for example, passed their initial dental examination with an officer quantifying that 25,000 fillings, 15,000 teeth drawn and 7,000 dentures ‘of all types’ were needed.[27] A Queensland corporal diarised his inspection.

My teeth, as a whole, were good, but there was apparently one hoary old wisdom tooth somewhere way back that was no longer any use to me. It was discovered in our last medical examination. Before I went up to the dental officer (following the receipt of his official request to be allowed to get at me), a couple of my comrades regaled me with accounts of what happened. ‘He’s got a bucket full of teeth up there’, I was told. ‘He just

pulls ‘em out and chucks ‘em over his shoulder, quick as lightning.’ So I went up. First into the dental officer who gives the injection. I didn’t feel much. Then around a partition into the chief puller out. I shut my eyes and waited. After a while I opened them, having noticed that the puller out had stopped touching me. ‘Can’t you get it out?’ I asked. ‘It’s out,’ he said, and it dropped ‘plonk’ into the bucket. I hadn’t felt a thing.[28]

Clerical particulars with full-face and profile photographs completed the selection process. Notwithstanding the rigour of the examination, underlying physical weaknesses in certain individuals only became apparent when ‘put to the actual test of soldiering’. In the event of a recruit receiving a medical discharge, Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* called for understanding, with the suggestion the men ‘might be spared some hardship if the military authorities had exercised more care and foresight’ while ‘those who left jobs ... [should] be reinstated by considerate employers.’[29] Regardless of application zeal or suitability, state enlistment quotas for the 6th Division filled within weeks. Recruiting continued, though, to both ready reinforcements and select aspirants for succeeding divisions.[30]

Reasons for volunteering were many and varied. In one instance, two naturalised Italian brothers presented at the Flinders Street station bureau to enlist, confident that should Italy enter the war, Benito Mussolini would side with Britain.[31] The 1st AIF’s proud tradition enticed others to join up. ‘This [new] force’, Grafton’s *Daily Examiner* editorialised, ‘has provided courageous and patriotic Australians with an opportunity of demonstrating once again that splendid volunteer spirit which was characteristic of their fathers and uncles who made up the Anzacs of imperishable fame.’[32] Outside a noble sense of duty or lust for adventure, some volunteers came forward on more prosaic grounds – to escape a tedious job, to exit an unexciting town and suburb, or to evade domestic woes.

Edwin ‘George’ Edwards mused:

I don’t quite know why I joined the AIF. Who does? Was it for adventure, or for the sake of my country? Was it propaganda playing on my emotions, to keep out of gaol, to avoid debt, or to get away from a nagging wife? Probably a little of each of the first three, but certainly none of the last. I had a lovely little girl whom I wanted to make my wife, a family to whom I was devoted, a good job, and I was reasonably happy, but felt that I could

never be completely happy until I joined the AIF. I had been in the militia for a month in an artillery unit, but the playing soldiers stunt had disgusted me and I could not get out of their uniform quickly enough.[33]

'Much to our delight we were issued with our service dress, boots and hats', Gunner Edwin 'George' Edwards (left) penned on 21 April 1940, his 29th birthday. 'We could not adjust them quickly enough to get them on. At last, we had the old rising sun up on our hats, and at last we could wear the plain drab khaki uniform of the famous AIF.' (courtesy of Jason Stanley)

Unable to pinpoint his own rationale for joining up, a would-be recruit considered other men's motives.

The men who joined the army were the type who stood up in trams and gave their seats to women. There are people who are constitutionally unable to resist when a call is made, or when they feel under some obligation. I doubt whether many of them could tell why they enlisted. The real cause was something deeper than they could fathom … There was, I believe a large body of men – perhaps the majority – who were adventurers at heart but common citizens by force of circumstances – how many of us are not – who saw in this call a glorious combination – the life of an adventurer with the duties of a citizen.[34]

Men in training at the Northam camp northeast of Perth, one of many camps springing up nationally, were quizzed in November 1939 about their

motives for enlisting. The majority, Perth's *Daily News* deduced, wanted to 'do something for Australia'. Other reasons included an attraction to 'adventure or the hope of improving their lot', some examples being: from a farmhand, 'to get this ruddy war over as soon as we can'; from a labourer, 'It's a better job than picking stumps'; from a truck-driver, 'For adventure; to see the world'; and from a butcher, 'It's in the family. There's always been someone in the army. When the war began there would be nothing else a man could do.'[35] Over 600 recruits were then in the Northam camp. More were expected. Drawn from all walks of life, the diverse band included 'bronzed farmers, public school boys and ex-university students, miners, carpenters, teamsters, truck drivers, bank clerks, mechanics, butchers, bookkeepers, stockmen, labourers and former unemployed.' Leaving the land, the transition to army life ideally suited a farmer, no longer shackled to an uncertain livelihood.

Three big meals a day, four blankets and a comfortable rig-out for nothing, good officers and NCOs, and no flaming worries about droughts and the price of wheat. It's a good job, and they're a bonzer crowd of chaps. This life will do me![36]

Much the same as Alan Smith, another man had walked 450 miles from Meekatharra to Perth to enlist. 'The material here is all right' affirmed a camp warrant officer, 'We'll soon make soldiers of them.'[37] Across the country at Ingleburn (NSW) clerks rubbed shoulders with labourers, the unemployed and other white-collar workers.[38] Many would-be recruits had travelled from the Northern Rivers and Newcastle in a packed troop train. Lieutenant Kenneth Curtis (2/2nd Battalion) looked on.

The men were in high spirits … They sang lustily and every town passed was a signal for vociferous calls and cheers. Bunting in the form of toilet paper startled mild-mannered churchgoers as it streamed from every window as the train sped through the outer suburbs of Sydney. Several gentlemen amused themselves between Gosford and Hornsby by climbing from window to window along the side of the train. They streamed off the train at Ingleburn carrying suitcases, sugar bags and every conceivable kind of dunnage.[39]

Yells of 'You'll be sorry' greeted bedraggled groups of men passing through the front gate. The new arrivals were issued blankets and a straw mattress.

While some militiamen wore their uniforms, the diverse mix of clothing mirrored former civilian vocations.[40] 'We were a bit jealous when we saw some of our militia mates who had previously been NCOs issued with the AIF uniform to become instructors', Edwin Edwards (2/1st Anti-Tank Regiment) jotted in his diary. 'We envied the uniform, not the stripes.'[41] An initial wardrobe of mismatched and ill-fitting uniforms was finally remedied by December. Now, looking the part, training began in earnest, albeit stymied by a lack of equipment and qualified instructors. Coming to terms with communal living, drill and discipline, within a matter of months the recruits would be on a war footing. 'Before I joined the army', Edwards reflected,

I had worked a lot on my own and I had also been in the sole company of my fiancée for some years and was comparatively unused to much male company. It surprised me to find out how quick the boys were at repartee, and how happy they kept at all times, turning everything into a joke and taking nothing seriously.[42]

A young Renmark gunner at Holsworthy (NSW) also felt cut out for his new role.

At dawn the guns open up with a tremendous explosion. There appeared a spurt of flame yards long and a whistle as the shell passed overhead. The war had begun! … This was a hard test to see how we stood up to it and believe me we would have gone on indefinitely. We relished our work.[43]

Unofficial mascots appeared as formations gelled and friendships grew. The 2/9th Battalion fêted 'Rudolph', a white Angora rabbit 'who drinks beer and eats anything.' 'Major Ram', a tobacco-chewing billy goat, was adopted by the 2/3rd Battalion. 'Linky' the Alsatian belonged to the 2/10th Battalion, his custodian joking: 'I'm thinking of starving him until he gets a chance to have a piece of Hitler.' Troops quartered at the Melbourne Showgrounds misappropriated their motif, 'a wooden effigy of a Jersey cow' from an outdoor advertisement. It became 'Ferdy' the cow. A stray sheep, eschewed as a rival mascot, roamed the showgrounds, causing consternation 'by charging through the ranks of men drilling in the arena.'[44]

A column of recruits marching from Liverpool to Ingleburn, led on horseback by New York-born Lieutenant-Colonel John A. Rena, Camp Commandant, and his Adjutant, Captain Hardy. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

AIF recruits learning to march. Of the interim uniform, Gunner Edwin ‘George’ Edwards wrote: ‘The “giggle” suits and hats got their name from their peculiar shapes which fitted no-one, and they were

either too big or too small (only two sizes they had.) The hats were of brown cloth with drooping edges and we looked like a bunch of convicts.' (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

* * *

Active duty approached. Menzies announced to the House of Representatives on 29 November 1939 that the 6th Division would leave for service overseas early in the new year. No destination was given, though Adelaide's *News* 'stated on higher authority' that it would go to Egypt. A storm of protest erupted. Australia's security could be jeopardised, Curtin argued.[45] Would conscription follow?

Gunner Ernie Osbourne (2/2nd Battalion), a Sydney labourer, recounted the prevailing mood following a public march.

Gee, what a crowd. I thought there was a crowd when the harbour bridge was opened but it had nothing on the crowd at the march, women were crying and playing up, one onlooker ... called [us] 5/- a day killers ... and one of our mates knocked him off his feet and the crowd did give a cheer.[46]

In a separate incident in Perth, a man 'dressed in a semblance of a military uniform and shouting "down with democracy – Don't fight for Australia"' was arrested in Perth with three companions and gaoled for fourteen days.[47] In his 'letter to the editor', Reverend G.E. Hale, in Adelaide, refused 'to tolerate war in any form.' Various groups across the nation likewise rallied to voice their disapproval. Public meetings staged by the Australian Peace Pledge Union, the Christian Socialist Movement, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Legion of Christian Youth collectively urged the Commonwealth Government to seek an immediate armistice.[48], [49] More widely, the Quakers announced their 'intention of refusing to register' on the national roll through their 'loyalty to Christ.'[50]

Soldiers found themselves in an unwelcome firing line. 'Even at this stage of the war', Gunner Edwin Edwards noted with irritation on Anzac Day 1940, 'the AIF had to put up with a lot of abuse from its own people. I've often thought since what a lot of good a few bombs would do the public of Australia.'

They want waking up! At times we were baited, called five-bob-a-day murderers, and slated by communists in the Domain. Newspapers, at

variance to our cause, were not slow to magnify the sometimes drastic action we took, but such action was the only chance of righting many wrongs and putting certain people in their places. At Ingleburn the boys burnt down canteens charging excessive prices and brought the prices down to a fair thing. At other times they raided communists in Sydney Domain, and eventually put an end to those disloyal meetings.[51]

Amid the polarised debate about the war, and a period of quiet unease across Western Europe, the 2nd AIF prepared to leave for the Middle East.

Rifle and bayonet training at Ingleburn, NSW. (State Library of NSW 25336)

Attention to detail. An AIF captain adjusts a recruit's belt. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

'Our wishes for the best of luck on active service'

A spell of final leave preceded embarkation. Emotions naturally flowed. A soldier at Puckapunyal consoled his mother, writing:

Dear Mum, just a quick note before breakfast to ask you to draw £1 out of the bank, and buy me a khaki shirt, with collar and pocket, and keep the change home for me. Now don't get upset, mum dear, and keep the old chin up. This will probably be my last weekend leave before final leave … I have got a good job now, and I'm quite happy and proud of the small bit I am doing. If you could hear the bands up here and see the boys swinging along just as I see them every morning, it would get you the same way. I don't know what it does to me, but I seem to get tense and excited all over every time I see them. The chaps that aren't in this show don't know what they are missing. When I hear a good march being played, up here, and see the bayonets glinting in the sun, row after row of them, I could go to Hell and back quite easily, and nothing could stop me. They are a wonderfully fit crowd of men up here, and all I can say is God help Hitler and his gangsters when we get at them. We would wipe them off the map if we only had pick handles to fight with ... At least you and Dad can look any one straight in the eye knowing that the family is doing its bit.[52]

Well-wishers gathered in towns across the country to farewell departing friends, husbands and sons. Residents in Derby, northeast Tasmania, met in their town hall on 3 December 1939 to send off local volunteers, including privates Max Krushka (2/12th Battalion) and Albert Chilcott (2/3rd Field Company). Each man was presented with a fountain pen plus some 'very good advice as to the uses to which it could be put.'[53] (Chilcott, a 21-year-old farm labourer, subsequently injured his knee and was discharged as 'medically unfit' on 18 May 1940.)

Mount Gambier's Mayor bade farewell to Corporal Arthur Pannell (2/4 Field Ambulance) and Private Peter 'Walter' Hudson (2/10th Battalion) the following year. 'They were', he declared, 'carrying away the fighting spirit which was in every Australian'. Speaking on behalf of the town, he wished them 'the best of luck, a happy time and a safe return.'[54] Friends and family similarly assembled in the Victorian town of Drysdale to send off brothers

Gordon and Wallace Duncan. ‘After three hearty cheers and the singing of “They Are Jolly Good Fellows”’, their father Gordon Duncan ‘thanked all for the magnificent evening they had given to their boys’. Men enlisting for overseas service were, in his opinion, ‘doing the right thing.’[55]

A farewell for SA soldiers (2/10th Battalion) shortly to leave for the Middle East. (State Library of South Australia B 58110)

Carnival scenes ‘welcomed the [1940] New Year with traditional gaiety, but the khaki uniforms’ of AIF soldiers on final leave, in Sydney’s *Morning Herald* coverage, gave ‘the celebrations a new significance.’ Kings Cross was especially busy.

Hitler was the butt of most of the floorshows in the places of entertainment. At one night club, where an elaborate midnight floorshow was presented, a small boy, with a long beard, representing 1939, danced a weary dance until he was successfully chased from the floor by sprightly 1940. The bandsmen, dressed in kilts and carrying pipes, played Scottish airs, and the patrons joined in ‘Auld Lang Syne’.[56]

In a more melancholy setting, debilitated veterans in Randwick Military Hospital – decades after the November 1918 Armistice – wrote to Brigadier

Arthur ‘Tubby’ Allen, commanding officer of the 16th Infantry Brigade, to offer departing servicemen an informal farewell.

Unfortunately, we cannot present ourselves at the camp or at troopships to cheer them on their way, but we’d like half a dozen of your fellows to drop in to see us before your brigade embarks. If this is impracticable, will you please convey to all ranks under your command, our wishes for the best of luck on active service.

Joseph McTague (ex-18th Battalion, 1st AIF) was confined to a hospital ward and still undergoing operations to remove shrapnel from injuries received in France decades earlier. Farewelling his 27-year-old son, Corporal Arthur McTague (2/31st Battalion), he joked: ‘This young fellow’s doing better than I did’, adding, ‘I never got past the rank of private.’[57]

Age farewells youth at Ingleburn, NSW. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

CHAPTER TWO

‘Hurried goodbyes and tearful farewells were universal’

Fresh from their New Year revelry, nearly half a million Sydneysiders congregated on 4 January 1940 to cheer 6,000 AIF 16th Brigade soldiers as they passed along city thoroughfares. Marching six abreast, the ‘magnificent’ mile-long column filed, company after company, in ‘perfect formation.’ Women lining George and Elizabeth Streets showered the men with confetti and paper streamers, ‘which became entangled in hats and bayonets, broke and fluttered round the marching feet, so that for a time the columns walked on streets strewn with coloured paper, like flowers laid in the path of a conqueror.’[1]

A week later, ribbons of khaki wound their path up the gangways of the luxury passenger liners *Strathnaver*, *Orford*, *Orcades* and *Otranto*, berthed at Pyrmont. ‘What, no luggage porters! What kinda war is this?’ boomed one of the more mercurial characters. Abundantly accoutred, the troops from the Inglewood army camp, Melbourne’s *Herald* chronicled, boarded the vessels, lugging:

haversack, greatcoat, kitbag, dilly bag, rifle, bayonet, mess tin, gasmask and steel hat. At the foot of the gangway, officials of the Army Pay Corps, and the Records Branch met them, checked their pay-books, ticked off their regimental numbers, and certified identification. All this was achieved with the utmost smoothness and the minimum of fuss. No raucous orders hurled from foghorn voices rose round the dockside. There was no need for bullock-driver eloquence.[2]

‘It’s a wonderful life’, Private Kenneth ‘Ken’ Moses (2/4th Battalion), a jackeroo in outback Queensland, exclaimed to a reporter. ‘I only enlisted a week ago.’ Once aboard, Private Stanley Dean (2/4th Battalion) removed his boots and changed his socks. ‘We slept in our boots last night’, he explained, ‘and we had to march the two miles to the station pretty fast this morning. Have I got tired feet or have I?’ Raucous hoots answered Captain Lance Cutcliffe’s (2/4th Battalion) announcement through a porthole: ‘I’m going to be just a mother to them’. Cutcliffe, a belt man with Coogee Life-Saving Club, joked how the ship’s swimming pool would be the next best thing to the Sydney surf.[3]

A staff embarkation officer checks the identity of soldiers quayside prior to boarding. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Farewell Sydney. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

'A couple of hours before the first liner drew away from the wharf', the *Herald* continued,

there arrived on the scene a group of 'AWL' lads. Seven of them dashed up in a taxi and commandeered a military lorry to take them the remaining 100 yards to the ship's side. 'Good luck, boys,' shouted the crowd. And now, everyone was aboard. The first liner cast off and began to move out to the Harbor. Every soldier climbed as high as he could to wave his piece of red or yellow muslin in farewell. Hurricanes of cheering re-echoed from the rocky heights around Pyrmont … Every ship siren shrieked its tribute. Every ferry whistle found its voice. The passage down the Harbor was a triumphant progress.[4]

Melbourne journalist Adele Shelton-Smith (later to become the first Australian woman to report from a foreign military theatre) watched as stirred 'staff officers cleared their throats. Nobody could find anything to say, and the rather peppery colonel [the embarkation officer] surreptitiously brushed away something from his eyes.'[5]

Despite the 'secrecy' of the sailing, hundreds of small craft were present to send off the troopships. Lining the cliffs above Jones Bay, spectators,

friends and relatives cheered the convoy as it steamed through the Heads, the bows of the great ships lifting and falling in the swell as they met the Pacific Ocean. Soldiers on board watched as their homeland passed from sight, the flotilla of escorting craft now gone.[6]

Troopship carrying men of the 6th Division, bound for to the Middle East, January 1940. (State Library of NSW)

Private Allan Anderson, a Condobolin (NSW) journalist, described what he called a 'pleasure cruise'.

... as indeed it was – the farthest thought from any one's mind was that we were leaving home to go and fight a war. Hearts were naturally very heavy as we watched Sydney Heads receding on our stern and I do not think anyone watched Australia disappearing below the horizon without a thought of the ones at home. Our one consoling thought was of the great day when we would be sailing not away from it, but towards it – with the war won and peace once more restored throughout the world.[7]

Quite unlike the lines of hammocks typical of a 1914 troopship, Private Jack Antony (2/4th Battalion) found himself 'in a tourist class cabin'. Savouring meals served in the first-class saloon, and waited on by the ship's steward, 'it was a real pleasure cruise'.[8]

AIF reinforcements dining in comfort aboard a troopship en route to the Middle East. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Joined at sea by ocean liners conveying the 4th New Zealand Brigade, and protective escorts, the battleship HMS *Ramillies* and cruisers HMAS *Australia* and *Canberra*, the first convoy steamed to Melbourne. Arriving on 12 January, it was joined by the *Empress of Japan*, carrying the 6th Division's headquarters. It was an 'unforgettable sight', Corporal Roland Hoffman diarised, 'to see ten ships, seven of them luxury liners, flanked by warships of the British and Australian Navies. They kept in perfect formation – it seemed as if their engines might be throbbing in unison.'[9] Further convoys would follow.

Lieutenant Kenneth Curtis (2/2nd Battalion) and his mates speculated 'incessantly' about their destination. The Middle East was a 'hot favourite' with Britain the 'next best bet.'[10] Settling into the world of luxury liner travel, albeit more cramped, Private Cyril Hughes from Whyalla found the first days affected by a 'head-on swell'. A few men were sick,

but for the remainder the sea was almost as smooth as glass. Luckily for us the ship we travelled in had not been stripped and we had the benefit of everything that goes with a boat of this type – pictures, swimming pool and so on. The meals were extra, and I think everybody thoroughly enjoyed it.

Each week every man was given an ounce of tobacco, a packet of cigarettes, chocolate and some fruit.[11]

Fremantle was the final stop on the Australian station. And a raucous night's leave. According to one soldier, 16th Brigade 'more or less took over the city'. Fire engines were driven through the main streets; some revellers 'took it upon themselves to drive whenever they rode in the trams.' 'Lots of the boys went up to Perth and brought back tales about its beauties and the people's generosity', Gunner Edwin Edwards diarised, but

being broke, we wandered around the lawns, gardens and palms, and actually scanned the ground to see if we could pick up any two bobs that anyone might have dropped. We reluctantly came to the conclusion that the people in Fremantle never allow holes to wear in their pockets.[12]

Men started drifting back to the wharf as sailing neared. A few were AWL. Others juggled all manner of local souvenirs including domestic pets, signposts and posters.[13] Captain George Yates (2/28th Battalion) charted the atmosphere as the great ships weighed anchor from Victoria Quay.

Hurried goodbyes and tearful farewells were universal. How well we remember that eventful day in January 1941, at Fremantle. The wharf packed with wives, mothers, sisters, brothers, sweethearts and friends all assembled to see us sail away. Amid cheers and tears the ship slowly left the wharf to take us out to the big transport which was to convey us safely overseas. All were sad that day and for many succeeding days.[14]

Monitoring from afar, Nazi propaganda promptly announced the sailing of an Allied armada and its destination – Suez. (Berlin disingenuously announced the loss of a troopship with all hands in a later broadcast.)[15] For the moment, however, there was no danger of enemy attack. Still, the reality of their situation was now dawning. Gunner Ronald Keast (2/7th Field Regiment), a Broken Hill labourer, noted how 'the boys on board who were setting out to do a job were unusually quiet though and were no doubt thinking of their loved ones at home and wondering when they would again see Australia.'[16]

'It sent thrills up and down our spines'

Leaving Australia was a new experience for most. ‘We are sailing along at present’, a South Australian sergeant penned, ‘black shadows in a black night, in front, behind.’

On our right are other ships, all drowned in universal blackness. Far ahead are the greyhounds of the sea, the destroyers, watching like a hen with a brood of chickens. Slightly closer we have the cruisers ready and able to give assistance to their smaller brethren should it be required.[17]

Boat drills were rehearsed should an enemy warship appear. ‘We all know our boat stations and exactly what to do in case of emergency’, Private Hector Riddel (2/25th Battalion) wrote. ‘We have had at least one alarm a day as we are in dangerous waters now, and we are all told to watch for raiders. We wear our life jackets all the time.’[18]

Any notion of a pleasure cruise disappeared with the resumption of training at sea. A Western Australian officer documented his demanding schedule:

6 a.m. till 8.30 a.m. rise, bath, shave, visit troops, breakfast; 8.30 till 4.30 p.m. parade with one break for lunch. Lecture and give instructions throughout the parade; 4.30 till 5.45 p.m. compulsory PT parade for officers; 5.45 till 7 p.m. attend lecture to officers; 7 till 7.30 p.m. dress for mess; 7.30 till 8.30 p.m. mess; 8.30 till 10 p.m. lecture to officers; 10 p.m. till midnight: prepare next day’s syllabus; midnight till 1.30 censor letters; 1.30 till 6 a.m. sleep.[19]

Father Gerard Youll, from Newcastle, lent a hand in revolver practice on one vessel, lobbing makeshift targets, ‘bottles with toy balloons attached’, overboard.[20]

The daily routine was seen by another Western Australian as ‘sometimes monotonous, [but at least it] occupied us during the day and furthered our training and knowledge’.

This ocean, notoriously rough at times, was exceedingly mild; no one to my knowledge being seasick after leaving the West. People who at great expense travel the world could never see the sights we enjoyed in convoy. Many large ocean liners with their attendant cruisers, battleships and aircraft carrier, were remarkable sights, especially when changing direction to turn into port. Occasionally a cruiser would pass close to us, the sailors

giving three cheers; one day a cruiser passing had the crew cheering, then the band played 'Advance Australia Fair.' It was quite an occasion. A battleship came near for the crew to say goodbye before leaving the convoy. Each ship in turn took and returned the cheer and with bands playing – in the middle of the ocean it was magnificent.[21]

Equally impressed by such fanfare, a Melbourne gunner noted a rousing Anzac Day exchange:

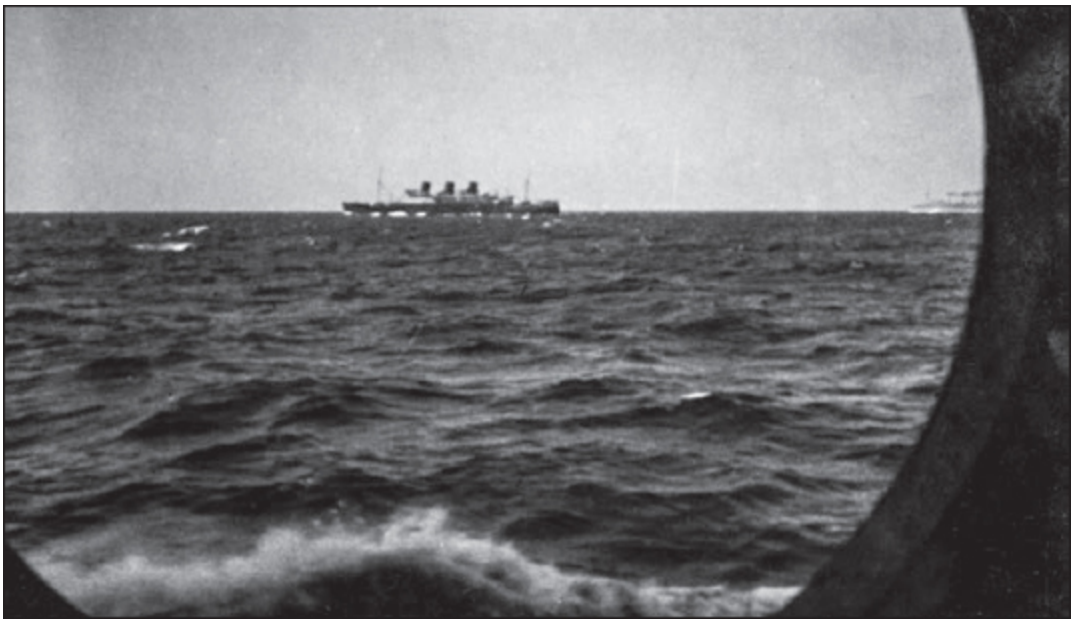
… a warship moved through the convoy with dressed ship and tons of cheering. Their band played 'Australia Will Be There,' while ours replied with 'Rule Britannia'. Then, they moved, quite close and treated us to 'The Road to Gundagai,' and we played 'Take Me Back to Blighty' for them. Even the toughest of us had to admit that it sent thrills up and down our spines.[22]

But it was not always smooth sailing across the Indian Ocean, as Signaller Eloi D'Alton (2/10th Battalion), an electrician from Rainbow (Vic.), discovered.

The vessel rolled from side to side consistently. Not a very nice feeling. Just a slow roll. It took about two minutes to return to vertical position after each roll, then away she would go to the opposite side. This motion is one of the worst and liable to make one seasick, but I was lucky.[23]

Time for some passed slowly, the tedium of weeks at sea frustrating one embarkee. 'Water, water, and still more water. By now the same old scenes morning, noon and night is becoming monotonous, but must be endured.' The cry of 'man overboard' broke the monotony of one voyage. The escorting vessel,

went 'flat out' to the scene and having located the man, the precision with which those naval boys went to work was a pleasure to watch. A boat was lowered, and the man picked [up] and the boat back in the davits within five minutes.[24]



Troopships at sea. Gunner Edwin ‘George’ Edwards diarised an enemy submarine encounter. ‘Just on dusk one of the escorting cruisers dropped ten or twelve depth charges at a [potential] submarine. We could feel great vibration on our ship from the explosions and could only hope they got it. A quiet evening followed, with no sign of enemy aircraft or shipping.’ (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/44)

They were soon to make land fall. Closing on Singapore, and about to spend several days docked at a British naval base, Edwin Edwards first glimpsed Malaya. The view, he wrote, was:

... the most beautiful I have ever seen before or since. It loomed up suddenly out of the haze. Ten or twelve sampans lay riding the lazy roll of the ocean, their occupants busily fishing. The next few days took us on a very interesting run across to Colombo. The sea was still and very calm and the [Royal Navy cruiser] HMS *Danae* acted as our escort. She went chasing a supposed submarine one day, but it was only a whale.[25]

Leave ashore in Ceylon (today Sri Lanka) or British India brought the novelty of sightseeing in an exotic land, another first for most men. Disembarking troops received a stipend of local currency with the firm admonition that they were ambassadors of their country, in proud AIF uniform, to be judged by their behaviour. Accordingly, low grade spirits were forbidden, certain ‘establishments’ were to be skirted, and cautionary tales forewarned of food poisoning, though a severe bout of dysentery would later depart with the convoy. Eager rickshaw pullers and native pedlars – all hoping to deprive the Australians of whatever currency they

carried – waited quayside. Exploring their first Eastern city, the tourists in uniform were typically steered to stores carrying hyper-inflated prices. While the locals came out on top financially, Kenneth Curtis recalled how 'the battalion got its money's worth in general entertainment.'[26]

Captain Sydney Newcomb (2/15th Battalion), a bank clerk, shared his adventure.

We had our first sight of land since leaving Fremantle, and the ship steamed into a small harbour where our battalion changed over, to a smaller vessel and continued the trip to Colombo. I missed the approach to Colombo as I was not too well but looking from the porthole the port seemed to be packed with shipping of all description and sizes. We were moored very close to the shore, but to our dismay we heard that there would be no leave for our chaps until the following day, so it was a case of hanging over the rail and envying the other troops we saw going ashore. However, there was much to interest us, for a fleet of native craft was around the ship all day endeavouring to sell their wares to the men and talk about bargaining? Well, our turn came the next day and early in the morning we all went ashore in ferries. I was still feeling unwell, but I was not going to miss the fun for anything, and in a short time, the men were scattered about the town. We toured the town and native quarter in rickshaws, hired a car out to Mt. Lavinia, came back through the European quarter, did some shopping, drank a lot of beer, went down through the native quarter again and saw Hindu temples and other queer places ... At roll call there were only a few missing, and they arrived back some time during the night. We left Colombo on Thursday, and our ship ran aground in negotiating the narrow entrance and by the time we got free of the mud the convoy was well under way and incidentally our place in the convoy was number 13.[27]

Private Hollister 'Jim' Dean (2/43rd Battalion), an Adelaide butcher, discovered a 'mixture of ancient and modern'. The traffic, he noted, was a mix of cars, 'oxen wagons, rickshaws, etc. all pushing and hooting to get through.'[28] (Hollister Dean was killed in action on 2 October 1943 near Milne Bay.) 'The sights in the streets were enough to bring on hysterics', Sergeant Alfred 'Rex' Mallyon (2/10th Battalion), a Port Pirie salesman penned.

Any vehicle drawn by mules (which seem to be in the majority over horses) was immediately halted by the AIF who took over from the drivers and used them as conveyances, while sturdy ‘bronco busters’ perched themselves on the rumps of the mules, which objected. They controlled the traffic, while the police looked on in amazement, confiscated all beer that passed in trollies (owing to the town opening the hotels for only half an hour), and took rides on wagons, lorries, and everything moving.From where I was standing, I saw what appeared to be a funeral coming down the main street. The head of it proved to be one of our chaps pushing a three-wheeled dust box adorned with his mate, while the whole of the traffic crawled along behind in the narrow thoroughfare. At the main crossing the box capsized, and after the two diggers had solemnly dusted themselves down, they changed places and weaved their way onward, leaving the crowd helpless with laughter.

As could be expected, leave ashore ‘was the boys’ day out’.

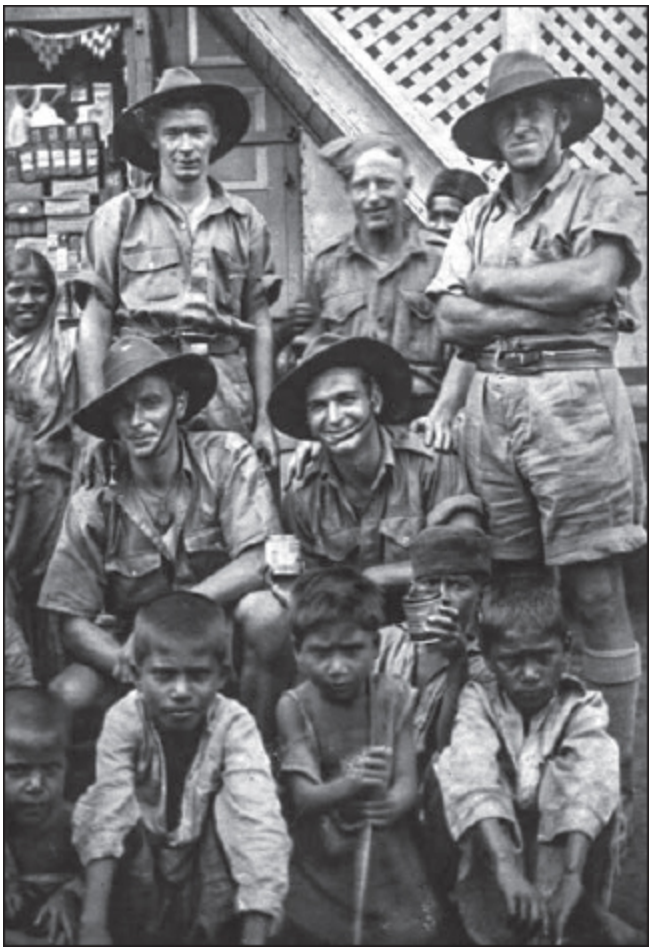
... and they made the most of it. It was great to see them return to the ship bearing all manner of souvenirs. They had picture advertising boards, ornamental animal horns, streamers, caps, helmets, and sacks of fruit. Heaven knows what would happen if we had to remain on board for a month without touching land.[29]

Rickshaws in Colombo. Handwritten note on back: ‘Self and Roy in Rickshaw. We are at Galle Face Green facing the sea. The Galle Face Hotel in the distance.’ (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/5)

‘For a run around in a rickshaw [in Columbo]’, Private Freddie Holt, and Ross Domney (2/11th Battalion) were charged double fare, ‘so naturally we paid nothing. They put on a show, but we took no notice.’

Holt’s next port of call was Bombay (today Mumbai) where ‘the only trouble was the smell’, a problem compounded by monsoonal rain.[30] Eager to explore India’s largest city, Private Harry Dick (2/2nd Battalion) witnessed ‘some very beautiful sights’.

> But the native quarters are awful. The people themselves have no idea of cleanliness, all household rubbish, old fruit, vegetables, everything, is swept into the alleyways, so you can guess the stench that soon arises after a few hours in the tropical sun.[31]



A snapshot with local children outside Deolali Camp, India, 100 miles north-east of Bombay (now Mumbai). (State Library of South Australia PRG 1737/2/5)

'The people', Private Harry Webster beheld, were 'a tribe to be remembered – [they] carry everything on their heads and sleep anywhere in the streets. The towns are old and toil worn and the women do most of the work.'[32] Also writing of Bombay, Senior Chaplain Frederick Porter, formerly of Bacchus Marsh, recorded:

a city of extremes in wealth and poverty – palace and hovel, prince and outcast, mosque and brothel, standing or living cheek by jowl. I saw the best and it was good, and I saw the worst and was disgusted, amazed, shocked and saddened by it all.[33]

Nearing the Red Sea, aptly named according to Harold Hammond (6th Australian General Hospital), since 'the heat is almost unbearable', some transports called at the British colony of Aden (today the temporary capital

of Yemen) on the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula.[34] It was 'beautiful to see from the ship as we approached', another soldier recounted.

With houses built in the side of extremely high mountains, whose points were often obscured by clouds, it looked really wonderful. The glamour was short-lived, however, for being allowed ashore for a few hours was enough for even the most venturesome. There was no trouble in getting the entire complement back on board – they were glad to leave.[35]

'We had some enjoyable evenings playing bridge and drinking Chinese beer', Sydney Newcomb, remembered of the final leg of the journey to Suez. 'The convoy was all over the place and apparently some danger existed from enemy surface craft. We had a strong escort, and I think most of the men were praying for something to happen.'[36]

* * *

'We duly reached the Middle East', Lieutenant John Ifould (2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion) revealed, adding the 'country is rather like the country in the Mallee without the trees.'[37] Purportedly the most bloodstained region on the planet, the Middle East was economically and strategically indispensable to Britain's Empire. The 5 percent of the world's oil then produced in the area was ample for Britain's immediate needs, or indeed those of the Axis. Geographically, the region shielded India and safeguarded the Suez Canal; politically, it underpinned British prestige. To lose the Middle East would be calamitous for Britain, its standing allies and potential new ones at a time when it was far from certain whether America would enter the war.

The Middle East in 1940.

Anthony Eden inspects newly arrived troops. Before leaving the Middle East, he affirmed that the region was ‘safe in their hands’. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Sir Miles Lampson, Britain’s Ambassador to Egypt, and General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander of British Forces in the Middle East, were on hand to greet the first convoy. Wavell voiced his approval of the Australian troops now coming under his command, having served with General Edmund Allenby (Egyptian Expeditionary Force) and observed AIF troops in action during the First World War. ‘When the Empire is at war Australia is at war’, Brigadier Arthur Allen, officer commanding the AIF contingent, responded. ‘We have come with a serious purpose in our hearts to take our place beside our sister Dominions.’[38] Songs from the Great War radiated through darkness as troop transports neared their destination – Kantara (El Qantara). Docking after midnight, the town throbbed with activity as Diggers streamed ashore by the light of flares. Veterans from the First World War quietly reminisced about their arrival into Egypt decades earlier. Their younger companions could only wonder what lay ahead; having never encountered war, how would they react? Would they survive?[39]

Sapper Frank O’Donnell (2/4th Field Company) was sailing in a later convoy on the Canal when enemy aircraft attacked, ‘bullets with taillights’ as he put it, narrowly missing him.

I saw these red and blue lights coming towards me, but I did not know what they were. I thought the airman was trying to light up a target for a bombing attack. The bullets came to within two feet of my face, less than arm's length, but I was not worried. I felt very much like reaching out and patting them down or touching them to see what happened. When they told me they were tracer bullets I nearly died.[40]

Safely ashore, crowded troop trains left on the five-hour journey to the British mandate of Palestine (today Israel).

A new arrival meets a young vendor in an ancient land. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

CHAPTER THREE

Palestine – ‘Brown as a berry, and never felt better’

The Middle East knew Australians only as khaki-clad soldiers. Vivid memories of Antipodean troops running amok through Cairo's quarters during the First World War, according to some, persuaded the Egyptian government to refuse entry to a new cohort, which in part led to their training in Palestine. ‘The oldest international battlefield of the world is again assuming the aspect of an armed camp’, Palestine’s *Post* announced. ‘Scenes where the titanic struggles of bygone ages sealed the destinies of great empires again teem with soldiers.’[1]

After a ‘lovely but uneventful’ sea voyage, Private Arthur Tillott (2/7th Field Ambulance) arrived at Julis military camp, some 27 miles northeast of Gaza. ‘We were given another hot meal and then allotted to various tents ... There is an average of ten to a tent and we are fairly comfortable.’ A Digger from Broken Hill found himself billeted with ‘the finest chaps possible. All country chaps from a bank clerk to a gardener.’ Boarding under canvas, Private Robert ‘Bob’ Connors (2/2nd Battalion), a Taree (NSW) shop assistant, reasoned, was healthier ‘than the huts we had at Ingleburn’, adding, ‘the meals are not too bad.’[2]

Captain Archibald McLellan’s (2/2nd Battalion) ‘new home’ was ‘pleasantly situated on the western side of a hill adjoining an orange grove. Both officers’ and sergeants’ messes were sited on the hilltop, commanding a magnificent view over a wide valley dotted with Arab villages and orange groves.’[3] Julis’ new residents set to work, servicing the defective sanitation system, setting out roads and paths and furnishing tents with make-do furniture. Flower beds and trees were planted, while familiar names such as

‘Kings Cross’, ‘Ingleburn’ and ‘Wagga’ appeared on road signs and living quarters.[4] All areas were bordered by the army’s emblem of orderliness – the white-painted rock. A large bell once rung at the Warrnambool railway station to cue train departures also ‘turned up’.[5] With the troops having left their mascots behind in Australia, local denizens such as lizards, hedgehogs and tortoises were ‘conscripted’.

Pitching camp. ‘Palestine carries an eternal debt of gratitude to the AIF’, a Palestinian barrister on holiday in Sydney exclaimed. ‘For four years we have been used to soldiers pouring into Palestine. We were never glad to see them – until the AIF arrived. Those boys have changed the whole place. They have made it one of the happiest, jolliest places there could be.’ (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Night-time ushered in an unwelcome cacophony. ‘We had just got used to the flaming jackals yowling around the camps, and now we have to get used to dogs barking all night’, a private grumbled. ‘I reckon a full-scale barrage won’t keep me awake after this.’[6]

Melbourne-born war correspondent John Hetherington was surprised to see a civilian wearing an Australian Returned Soldiers’ League badge outside the ancient building housing the officers’ mess. A Russian Jew who arrived in Australia in 1911, the man had joined the 1st AIF in 1917 and served in the 56th Battalion in France. Having emigrated to Palestine in the

1930s, the veteran talked of returning to Australia, 'the best country in the world. It seems to be the only place untouched by trouble of some kind.'[7]

Camp security was of immediate concern to Arthur Tillott.

The Arabs are our biggest snag here, as they are the biggest thieves going. They will sneak in and take an article from under our very noses and get away with it. They are so bad we have to picket the camp day and night. The night picket is armed and it's flowers for the Arab who is seen inside our lines.[8]

'We dare not leave our tents unguarded for a moment', Sapper Ray Bahr (2/8th Field Company Engineers), a Henty (NSW) farm labourer, informed his parents, 'otherwise our gear would disappear. Our rifles have to be padlocked at night, because the Arabs have a weakness for rifles.'[9]

While a passage in *The Australian Soldiers' Pocket Book* – 'how to behave abroad' – warned against any 'sense of racial superiority', long missives written through the lens of white Australian ideals were stamped and sent home. The Arab 'was a very lazy individual and the women appear to do all the work', a soldier from Tumut (NSW) expressed; 'one Australian would do the work of five or six Arabs.' Irked by local hygiene, 'all fruit purchased from them has to be washed in Condy's crystals [iodine]', he was nevertheless affected by an incident inside the camp.

The Arabs evidently do not believe in doctors. When I was in hospital recently one of the Arab recruits that had enlisted in the Palestine Army was brought in suffering with acute appendicitis. The doctors decided on an immediate operation. Through an interpreter he said he would not have an operation. He had to sign a paper to this effect. He practically signed his death warrant as when I left there was no hope for him.[10]

Soldiers pose with a young local girl in Khassa, Palestine. (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/594)

* * *

British authorities and Zionists continued to clash after the outbreak of hostilities – the latter wanting to increase Jewish immigration; Britain doggedly regarded such immigration as illegal and a threat to regional stability. Britain had assumed responsibility for Palestine under a League of Nations Mandate in 1920. At this time there were 650,000 Arabs and some 50,000 Jews in the mandated territory, a number that had grown to 310,000 by 1935. The so-called Balfour Declaration of 1917 had promised to establish a Jewish national homeland (in the then Ottoman region) to garner Jewish support for Britain's war effort. Simultaneously, London promised Arabs a united country encompassing most of the Middle East. Neither promise eventuated, and violence became a hallmark of the region.

Riots broke out in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv shortly after the Diggers' arrival. 'They both hate one another', Sergeant Eric Martin (2/2nd Battalion) wrote of the opposing factions, 'and are equally despised by all British troops and police here.' AIF Parties needed at least one man with a

rifle and ball ammunition to leave their camp, returning by 4 p.m. Officers carried loaded revolvers and an armed guard travelled on all leave buses.[11]

‘Reminiscent of a Bondi surf carnival’

Travel helped compensate for a soldier’s dangerous life, separated from loved ones and dominated by authority.[12] Leave presented the welcome opportunity to fossick through old battlefields, explore ancient holy places or engage with the local populace. One Digger was intrigued by a series of open-air Arab letter writers, each sitting before a desk with paper and pen. Not having heard from his girlfriend, he gesticulated using a photo plus a few words of English and broken Arabic to communicate his despair. For a small fee, a note was dashed off in a flourish of alien fount. ‘I don’t know what this letter says but nothing else made her write. Maybe this will.’[13]

Biblical sites beguiled newcomers. ‘This army is great’, Private Clarence Beattie enthused. ‘I would not throw it up for anything. We were in Jerusalem the other day and saw some wonderful sights. The old city is very beautiful.’[14] Gaza captivated Belfast-born Signaller John Skinner (2/2nd Battalion),

which, although now only a small town, and inhabited solely by Arabs, is mentioned in the Old Testament as a big city of great importance. It is mentioned in the life of Samson. But what is even more interesting to me is the fact that it was there that the Australians fought one of their biggest battles against the Turks in the last war, Gaza being one of the Turkish strongholds. We spent a couple of hours roaming about in the old Turkish trenches, which were finally captured and occupied by the British and Australian troops. There are miles of these trenches right across the country. I also visited the Gaza war cemetery. It is large and very well kept.[15]

Diggers with an Arab guide outside the Mosque of Omar. Jerusalem's old city, Staff Sergeant Anthony Ryan found, was 'as fascinating as any place I have been in, with unexpected pleasure and interests cropping up everywhere. Its cobbled streets, its seething population, its quaint shops, its mottled people and its very history and tradition colour it as no other city has been coloured for me.' (State Library of South Australia PRG 691/12/25)

Gaza's war cemetery similarly touched Private Vincent Pinchin (2/2nd Battalion).

The graves are in rows, divided in sections by hedges. Everything is spick and span, evidence of constant work. We saw the old trenches, including shallow fire trenches and deep communication trenches. Many of the boys found relics of the last war, including lumps of shrapnel, bullet cases and rusty bully beef tins. It was a very interesting day.[16]

Private Cecil McNamara (2/2nd Battalion), a farm worker from Scone (NSW), marvelled at Majdal fortress' 'fine statues of beautiful marble, with some very clever engravings, also some very nice pillars, lying on the ground, which, I understand, have been there for many years.'[17] Many men were enthralled by sites familiar from religious or scholastic reading. 'Jerusalem is a place in which I would like to stay for several weeks and

visit all the places which had been trodden on by our Lord', Gunner Leo Bradley (2/1st Field Regiment) told his parents.[18] Feeling 'quite at home', and 'receiving a marvellous education though travel', Sergeant Albert Hertzberg was 'honoured' to pray at Jerusalem's Wailing Wall

… a place which for 2,500 years has been the most holy place for praying … There were many hundreds of Jews – rich and poor praying at the Wall … Well, you can imagine, Jews all around me. Could it be possible that this Australian is a Jew?[19]

Shoe-shine boys in Jerusalem. Sergeant Herbert 'Blondy' Harvey, a Port Lincoln railway porter, had 'two days' leave at Tel Aviv, and 'had a good time, even though I did have my boots cleaned by shoe-shine boys about six times a day, and my photo taken at nearly every street corner.' (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/586)

Taking a more pedestrian path, a Queensland corporal learnt 'after a few hours in Jerusalem', that you become proficient 'at dodging cars. Over here

they drive on the right-hand side of the road, and the Arab drivers just put their trust in Allah, their foot on the accelerator, hand hard on the hooter, and away they go.'[20]

Corporal Eric Maxwell (2/2nd Battalion) spent a day's leave in Tel Aviv – a 'fine new Jewish city' – though the sheer number of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution was an 'eye-opener.' Curious to learn more, the young Grafton (NSW) printer enjoyed some 'great chats', though found it hard 'to draw them out of their shell.' Sergeant Albert Harrison (2/4th Battalion), a Sydney railway porter, was shocked by the sight of two beached ships opposite the Soldiers' Club, a spectacle underscoring the refugees' desperate plight. Refused permission to dock at various Mediterranean ports, the captains had run their vessels aground at Tel Aviv so the fugitives could swim ashore. Unsurprisingly, Corporal Reginald 'Rex' Robberds found the cosmopolitan city, a 'regular Tower of Babel'.[21]

Jewish refugee ship beached at Tel-a-Viv. (State Library of South Australia PRG 1601/2/28)

Sights such as the 'cobalt blue Mediterranean with its pounding surf ' and 'evergreen citrus orchards' stirred up pleasant memories of home for Private John Mann (2/4th Battalion), a Sydney carpentry labourer. Thriving native wattles were an extra surprise, as were the eucalypts planted in

memorial to the late General Sir John Monash by Jewish settlers. Australian troops were also directed to plant and care for a gum tree as a living legacy for the AIF, one soldier joking: 'I'm doubtful if the poor blighter that I planted will grow.'[22]

Men from the land naturally took an interest in local agricultural practices. A soldier from Grafton (NSW) was struck by the primitive cultivation methods still employed, 'the same as BC. It is most peculiar to watch a bullock and donkey, and a camel and donkey at work together' for ploughing.[23] Sapper Ron Adams (2/5th Field Company) was 'brown as a berry, and never felt better'. He gazed at wheat crops being stripped 'by hand with a scythe. Women and kids all doing their share.'[24]

Lieutenant Duncan Goslett (2/2nd Battalion) reckoned the Arab was a 'very industrious fella and it is really an eye-opener to see the amount of work he can do with his very primitive plough drawn by a camel, an ox or an ass, sometimes a combination of any two.'[25] Private Edward Graham (2/3rd Battalion) instead viewed the age-old technique of separating grain from the stalk as slow and tedious.

After the crop has been collected it is placed on a vacant square in the village and attacked in all kinds of ways. Cows and donkeys are tied together and driven by the Arabs backwards and forwards over the crop, or the Arabs tackle the crop with sticks.[26]

Amused by farming techniques presumably unchanged for millennia, Private Carl Hyne (2/2nd Infantry Troops Workshops), a Tasmanian dairy farmer, wondered how some of the farmers he knew back in Alexandra 'would get along if they were forced to apply the same farming methods as are used here ... and yet the farming community here seems to get along somehow or another, slow but sure.'[27]

Arabs on donkeys, Palestine, 1940. One of the AIF's first sports meetings was a donkey race. As one rider recorded: '12 officers mounted little donkeys which seemed too small to carry their heavy weight "jockeys". They were hired from Arabs specially for the occasion. It was a trying experience.' (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Embracing his 'open-air life', Corporal Bill Carmichael (2/3rd Battalion) noted a young stone mason plying his craft with mallet and chisel. A local butcher also caught his eye, as he recounted to a friend, also a butcher, in Crookwell (NSW).

… instead of having the meat inside the premises, as you do, it is displayed on the street and customers just pick and choose. I'm darned if I know how they get on in the summer, for I did not see any sign of refrigeration whatsoever.

Posing for an obligatory snapshot atop a camel, Carmichael was thrown headfirst from the beast when it unexpectedly rose, much to the amusement of nearby Arab spectators.[28]

To curb instances of 'discreditable behaviour', Brigadier Allen banned drinking and eating in public, undone collars, the directing of civilian traffic, obscene language and riding donkeys in the streets. To quieten critics that ANZAC troops (reminiscent of their First World War forebears) were an incorrigibly ill-disciplined mob, steps were taken to keep the men suitably occupied and entertained. An army newspaper was established;

cinemas, recreation huts and clubs opened, selling food, beer and other luxuries until 9 p.m.

Social gatherings opened avenues for soldiers to fraternise with local women. Trooper Jim Roberts from Renmark (SA) attended a 'really nice' dance, the 'only trouble being that our language was often of little use, as the girls were mostly refugees from Poland, Austria and Vienna [*sic*]. Those that could speak English were exceedingly interesting.' As for the communication barrier, 'we don't let a little thing like that stop us', another soldier bragged.[29]

'No need to worry about us', Sister Mona Prindable (2/1st Australian General Hospital) reassured her sister; 'we are all enjoying life and have dancing and parties when not on duty, so you see life has its compensations.'[30]

Sporting competition (and surreptitious betting) also commenced. Private Arthur Smith enclosed a photograph of his 'so far undefeated football team' in a letter to a friend in Geeveston, Tasmania:

… I suppose, like all football teams, we will crash sooner or later. We have several league players from various capital cities playing with us. You know how they growled at us for betting two bobs at our matches at home. Well, you ought to see the betting on a match here. I won 1,000 mills on our last match. Don't think I am rich for life, because this is only about £1 in Aussie money. We can't play too often in the heat or there would be nothing of us left.[31]

'I have been playing cricket fairly well', Lance Corporal Laurie Hodges informed his grandparents, having 'scored over 1,000 runs with the bat and taken 50 wickets with the ball. I was selected in a team that toured for three weeks and met with great success.'[32] Matches were played against the British teams, while a rugby union squad travelled to neighbouring Syria to challenge a French team.[33]

The AIF's Australian XI cricket team at Haifa, Palestine. (State Library of South Australia. PRG 691/12/24)

AIF beach surf carnival, described by one correspondent as 'the biggest event since Samson pulled down the pillars of the temple, and slew the Philistines.' 'They are jolly good beaches', Private Leo Liddy (2/9th Field Regiment), beltman of the North Bondi Lifesaving Club, reported upon his return to Australia. (State Library of South Australia PRG 691/12/28)

An Australian sporting institution, the surf club, was inaugurated with the AIF's first surf lifesaving team, using a Manly beach reel, patrolling Gaza's beach. On one occasion Harold 'Digger' James of Kiama assisted as

beltman in the rescue of five troops caught in a strong undertow.[34] Troops later crowded onto slopes leading to the beach to watch teams competing in a tournament before official parties and scores of enthusiastic Arab onlookers.[35] 'The scene was reminiscent of a Bondi surf carnival', a correspondent recorded, 'with a grand parade, march past of teams, and bands playing.'[36]

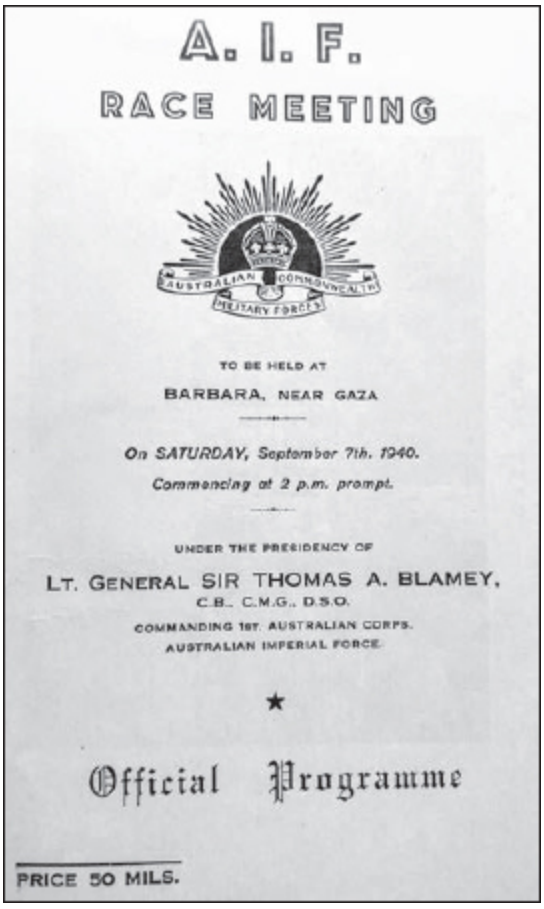
AIF spectators at 'probably the strangest setting in which an Australian surf carnival has ever been held.' (State Library of South Australia PRG 691/12/29)

Another touch from home was held – a country race meeting. In an unconventional assignment, Army engineers laid out a track, resembling Randwick, afterwards fenced, rolled and watered in preparation for the inaugural Palestine event. A Perth soldier found the site 'done up just as good as any suburban racecourse ... a credit to the authorities.'[37] The Victorian Comforts Fund appealed for racing colours while horses, it was reported, were 'obtained from every possible source.'[38] It was 'unforgettable scene' on 7 September 1940 as soldiers from Australia, Britain, Poland and Czechoslovakia mingled with jockeys, Arabs, donkeys and camels. 'We had a great day', Private Patrick Maher (2/7th Battalion)

raved. ‘There were thousands of Arabs in attendance. It was a great sight to see the different classes ... some of these travelled for a week to see the races.’[39] Two of the seven races held were restricted to AIF riders, run with silks worn by past Melbourne Cup winners.

Army Pay Corps staff ran a bustling tote while licensed bookmakers did a ‘roaring trade’. The milling crowd, ‘Arab or Australian’, Wagga Wagga’s *Daily Advertiser* detailed,

all seemed intent on backing the winner. The spirit of the day proved too much for the ‘hardheads’. Two-up schools sprang up all over the course and the Arabs looked on in amusement as the pennies flew.[40]



Official programme of the AIF race meeting held at Barbara, near Gaza, on 7 September 1940. (State Library of Victoria)

The war, which may have been momentarily forgotten, returned to centre stage the next day with the 2nd AIF’s first casualty on active service. Thirty-two-year-old Lance Bombardier Keith McMillian (2/2nd Field

Regiment), recently discharged from hospital after losing a leg in a road accident, was killed during an Italian air raid on Tel Aviv. McMillian was among the 137 dead and 350 wounded.[41] Lieutenant Alexander Sheppard (2/4th Battalion) described the 'indiscriminate attack' in a letter to his wife:

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and there were many people in the streets, particularly children, for there was no school that day. The stillness was broken by an explosion, followed by sirens. But the sirens were too late. Eight or nine explosions followed. There was no time to take cover.[42]

Soldiers on leave assisted in any way they could. Incensed by the slaughter of innocent civilians, a Digger slammed the 'murderous air raid. We know ourselves there's not a single military objective there, and it touched the boys' feelings a bit and everyone was saying "Wait till we get a go at those _____ dago _____ s"".'[43] Another summed up the feeling of those seeking to avenge the raids: 'I am sure the Italian is not going to have it all his own way, and I think the boys are quite willing to play ball with him any day he likes to call around, and if his undersized rat of a mate likes to come along, I am sure they will receive a very warm welcome and lively reception.'[44]

Invalided home through a camp-related accident in Palestine, Gunner George Edwards (2/2nd Anti-Tank Regiment) 'never got used to the raids ... The screaming noise of the planes is frightful as they come down. They cut the motor and you start counting and waiting for the bombs. If you can count up to ten before the motor starts up again you can reckon the bombs have gone past [*sic*] you.'[45] Edwards later died from his injuries on 14 June 1941.

Mussolini declares war

Up until May 1940, Captain Archibald McLellan had felt that war 'had seemed remote'. The period of non-aggression across Western Europe, dubbed the 'Phoney War' or '*sitzkrieg'*, ended on the tenth of that month with Hitler's invasion of Luxembourg, Holland and Belgium (four weeks after invading Denmark and Norway). Two days later, on 12 May, advancing Wehrmacht columns crossed into France. Writing in response, Menzies asked:

Are we in Australia, because we live 12,000 miles away, to shrug our shoulders with indifference, and concentrate upon the pleasures of life as if

the possible defeat of Great Britain and or France meant nothing to us? Or are we to treat the whole deadly business as a challenge ... that we will admit of no defeat when all those good and honourable things for which we stand are at stake?[46]

Mussolini's heel-dragging, meanwhile, frustrated Hitler, whose call to arms had so far fallen on deaf ears. As late as 29 May 1940, Mussolini assured his chiefs of staff: 'on the land front we cannot undertake anything spectacular, we shall remain on the defensive.' Changing tack, he then notified Hitler of his decision to capitalise upon Nazi success in France and enter the war. Four days before Paris fell on 14 June 1940, the dictator opportunistically declared war on France and Britain. Despite pockets of gallant resistance, France capitulated in one of its worst defeats in history. As part of the Armistice agreement signed on 25 June, Germany agreed to occupy only the western and northern regions of France, roughly 60 percent of the country. The elderly Marshal Philippe Pétain, a national hero after his success at Verdun during the First World War, and his collaborationist Vichy regime would oversee the rest of the country and colonial possessions including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria and Lebanon. Where would Hitler strike next, a Digger from the Riverina wondered?

Now that France has thrown in the sponge the war may possibly develop into a long, drawn-out struggle, but no matter what happens one can rest assured that Britain and her Allies must eventually come out on top … Goodness only knows when the struggle will end, but we will all do our bit.[47]

For Hitler, the fall of France raised the vexed question of how to overcome Britain. Two possibilities were considered – a direct invasion or a broader strategy that would ultimately see the collapse of the British Empire. Fatefully, he chose the latter. In one of the most consequential decisions of the war, the Führer also directed his army commander-in-chief, Field Marshal Walter von Brauchitsch, to formulate plans for invading the Soviet Union. All future operations against Britain would be of secondary importance while he pursued his long-held ideological dream of conquering the Soviet Union. It was now that Mussolini intervened, eyeing Egypt as part of a new Roman Empire stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Such a flamboyant vision required a large and well-equipped

military. But as it stood, Italy's rearmament programme had lagged well behind those of Britain and Germany – a consequence of Mussolini's early expansionist policies, a poor industrial base and a dearth of raw materials. Italian muscle had also been sapped by recent fighting in Ethiopia and during the Spanish Civil War; it would be years before the country could fight a major war against a modern adversary, and then only with significant economic and military assistance.

Mussolini's declaration of war, not unexpectedly, received a lukewarm response in Libya; his commander in chief, Air Marshal Italo Balbo, opposed any incursion into Egypt. It was only under pressure from Rome that he drew up provisional plans for a march – since his infantry divisions were poorly motorised – on Cairo, some 1,250 miles from Tripoli across a predominantly waterless desert. A different story unfolded across the frontier, where Wavell immediately sprung into action with plans to 'dominate the Mediterranean at the earliest possible moment'.[48] On 11 June Royal Navy (RN) ships sailed from Alexandria in an unsuccessful attempt to lure Mussolini's *Regia Marina* (Italian Navy) into battle. Tobruk was bombed and shelled while British armoured cars forced their way through the rusting barbed-wire barrier erected along the border. Forced onto the defensive, Balbo reassured Rome of his determination to resist – 'we will not give up and we will perform miracles.' More tellingly, he quipped, 'If I were the English commander, I would already be in Tobruk'.[49]

Meanwhile in Australia, a rural New South Wales newspaper conjectured: 'We may now expect our own AIF to move into action and we may look forward with the utmost confidence to defeating the Italians on each and every occasion that the Italians allow the Aussies to get within range.'[50]

'Anxious to get into anything that looks like a fight'

'The weeks crept by', Captain Archibald McLellan counted. Training progressed and 'we were really becoming a battalion', he noted with pride. 'Our first reinforcement officers were absorbed into the battalion. We dug miles of trenches [hard labour more than justifying the continued use of the 1st AIF's sobriquet 'Digger'] and dozens of dugouts on exercises; we got our [Bren Gun] Carriers and almost a complete establishment of vehicles.'[51]

The tactical manoeuvring, a veteran battalion commander observed, 'captured the men's interest'.

They haven't got the experience behind them yet, but they're made of the same stuff as the coves I worked with last time. They're throwing themselves into this stunt like old hands. It's the most realistic touch of war they've had.[52]

In Private John Mann's estimation, the 6th Division was now a 'well-trained and versatile army, and it is evident that many of the unfortunate mistakes made in the last war, when half-trained men were flung into action, will not be repeated.'[53] An emboldened veteran from the First World War was similarly stirred to ask: 'if we did what we did at Gallipoli untrained, what'll we do in this one with all our training?'[54]

A hunger for action grew. 'We have all settled down to serious training here, and are all jumping out of our skin, waiting to be up and doing our bit in action', Private Graham Weekes (2/1st Australian General Hospital) laid bare.[55]

'Most of the chaps are on their toes to be up and doing and are anxious to get into anything that looks like a fight', a soldier from New South Wales' Upper Hunter region informed his brother, the letter also detailing one Digger's misguided quest.

A chap here could not wait any longer, so he set off to find the war on the Italian Somaliland front [in east Africa!]. He set off with full equipment and rifle and travelled by train to the [Suez] Canal, where he was stopped by the military police. He told them that he was on a secret mission, so they let him through and he was not finally apprehended until he had arrived at the Libyan border. He was returned to camp yesterday and is to be tried for absenting himself without leave.[56]

Also 'itching' to fight, Lance Corporal Walter 'Boxer' Newton (2/8th Battalion), an Albury mercer, shared his division's desire to be 'turned loose' against the 'spaghetti merchants', adding that it should provide valuable practice for 'rabbit shooting', as part of the 'cleaning up' process before returning home to good old 'Aussie'.[57]

CHAPTER FOUR

‘The easiest and cheapest way to see Egypt is to stand at your tent door and watch it blow past’

History swung full circle with the AIF’s return to Egypt. The Australian 6th Division (minus the 19th Brigade) was transferred to Helwan camp, outside Cairo, in August 1940 to continue its training and to provide security for the Nile Delta. ‘They are the same magnificent fighting men’, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* opined, and even ‘more confident’ than the men of 1915 because they are nourished by the Anzac tradition.’[1]

Cecil McNamara found the passage across the Sinai Desert to Cairo the ‘worst part’ of the journey. ‘The weather was terribly hot, and there is a tarred road through this great stretch of sand. We eventually got to the Canal, and then it was a beautiful drive from there right to our camp.’[2] Lieutenant Ronald McIntosh’s (2/3rd Battalion) crossing, conversely, was ‘marvellous – 350 miles across the desert on a tarred road without mishap.’ Having said that, he could now understand how people could ‘go mad in the desert ... with its unending sand, the same sight mile after mile – the glare, the bareness, and, above everything else, the loneliness.’ McIntosh also gave thought to the 1st AIF’s deeds.

One’s thoughts stray many a time, while on the trip, to our fathers who were in this desert during the last war. What men! It makes me feel proud that I can say that my father was one of those men. What an army they must have been. My ideal is to be half as good as such men.[3]

Signaller John Skinner, for one, ‘wasn’t sorry to leave Palestine.’

I had seen most of the places of interest which were to be seen, and, anyway, Egypt is so much nicer than Palestine. Of course, when I say that, I don't include the desert. One cannot get anywhere more barren than the desert, but then, one is not in the desert all the time … I have become quite an expert in water economy. I can now have a shave, clean my teeth, and have a wash (and quite a good wash at that, too) in a pint of water, and the other day I had a bath in less than a steel helmet full of water. But I must say things are much better than we expected them to be.[4]

'The highlight of the whole trip' for John Hetherington was the morning his train passed another headed in the opposite direction carrying green-uniformed Italian prisoners of war (POWs).

The Australians bellowed facetious greetings to the Italians, who apparently did not understand such quips as 'How's the spaghetti market today?' and 'We'll give your love to Musso.' The prisoners looked far from soldierly as the train passed by. They wore an ill-fitting motley of clothing and seemed to lack entirely the average British soldier's smart bearing.[5]

Unable to specify his whereabouts, Private Don Birdsey hinted at his location via a glimpse of the Suez Canal:

Sand stretches for miles everywhere, but the weirdest sights are really unbelievable. From my doorway you can see funnels and masts travelling along in the sand. They look as if they are sailing in sand, but they must be in water, so perhaps you can guess where I am.[6]

Australian troops were 'experiencing real desert conditions for the first time', a columnist reported. 'The view from my tent is an adequate representation of the abomination of desolation.'[7] The AIF camp, however, was nevertheless popular given its proximity to Cairo and the opportunity for leave – 'lavishly bestowed upon us', a soldier gratefully acknowledged.[8] As in 1914, the city seduced Australian servicemen with its rich and striking cultural tapestry. 'The Australian soldier today gets just as much fun out of Cairo leave as his father did', war correspondent Guy Harriott noted,

and the jauntily worn slouch hat is as familiar a sight in the streets of the capital as it was a quarter of a century ago. It is a city which, with its incongruous mixture of the very new and the very old, its cosmopolitan

population, its endless associations of legend and history, never fails to fascinate.[9]

Welcoming a new cohort of Diggers, as 45-year-old Sapper Dan George, a 1st AIF veteran rediscovered, Cairo was 'the same old city with its mosques, guides and hawkers selling their wares and with beggars and their cry' for baksheesh.[10] Memories rekindled, an older soldier 'found myself believing that I was 23 years younger and wearing a corporal's stripes on my sleeve instead of a major's crowns on my shoulders' as he again wandered through 'one of the most lively, fascinating and cosmopolitan cities of the world.'[11]

From the old guard, however, came a warning against local miscreants who could 'thieve the eye from a needle'.[12] Driver Roy Mainstone (2/7th Field Ambulance) fell for a 'poor half-starved, ragged devil' pulling a 'baksheesh stunt'.

Lamb-like, I coughed up a piastre. Then the poor, miserable, starving son of a Sphinx pulled out from under his rags and tatters a purse which made my week's pay appear like chicken feed. Making no secret of this wealth, he dropped my piastre into his purse, and it disappeared again into the depths of rags and filth. Once bitten twice shy ...[13]

In his introduction to haggling, Private Allan Anderson quickly realised how the city's merchants were 'out to amass huge fortunes'.

... exceedingly high prices are asked for anything to be sold. The best method is to at least quarter the price asked for the article and use this as a basis for bargaining – even then you can bet your last piastre you are being robbed.[14]

Even exiting a cab, Neville Roennfeldt (2/3rd Field Regiment), an Albany (WA) gardener, discovered was:

to invite a siege of beggars – women wanting half a piastre for the baby – urchins wanting cigarettes. A lighted cigarette butt rarely reached the ground, but was deftly caught by one of the crowd. No sooner would one sit down to a drink in a hotel than someone would want you to purchase a rose or a carnation for the buttonhole, or numerous bootblacks would pester one for a shoeshine.[15]

Bairnsdale farmer Gunner David Russell (2/3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment) encountered a snake charmer who, after letting a scorpion bite him, replicated the carny trick with a cobra, a grass snake and a sand viper. Nonchalant after the routine, the con artist bragged he would be unharmed by the venom. 'Probably', Russell figured, 'their fangs had been removed beforehand ... He is used to the tourist trade with whom money does not count much, and so he puts on a stiff price.'[16]

Cairo's rambunctious night life beckoned, though a strict blackout, also novel for Allan Anderson, took 'a little getting used to, but after falling down a dozen or so flights of stairs, bumping some hundreds of people, posts and buildings and losing lumps of skin off every part of the body, one becomes more or less used to it.'[17]

'We can go out every night as long as we are back at Reveille', Sergeant Wallace Duncan (2/8th Battalion) penned, the cafes and cabarets open until dawn.[18] Brothels, overseen by the Medical Corps, were established in Cairo's Wass'ah district. Lectured on personal hygiene and venereal disease, Jack Barber (2/17th Battalion) discovered 'streets of brothels'.

These were to pose a big problem for the army with so many men on the loose at night. It was only a matter of time before the CO and medical officers decided to ban all the brothels with the exception of two … which were regularly visited by the medics. The girls working in these places had a framed calendar in their rooms which was stamped whenever they had passed the regular medical inspection.[19]

Cairo's ancient wonders were another prime drawcard. 'There was no disappointment about the great pyramid', a wowed Digger declared.[20] 'It is beyond description', Private Andrew Stephenson (2/5th Battalion) wrote in awe:

It stands 450 feet high and covers 12 acres of ground. It affected me strangely, particularly when three aeroplanes flew just overhead – was I [*sic*] struck by the contrast, the old and new, and wondered of the ages, and generations of men that had passed under its shadows, and what inspirations they received from this lasting monument that has stood the test of centuries ... I wonder if our Shrine will outlast the Pyramid or will future generations use it as an object for tourists and sightseers to wonder who built it and why.[21]

Privates Sydney Grant, a wool checker from Horsham, and Edgar Gent, a labourer from Kaniva (2/3rd Company AASC) on 'Ajax' and 'Pharlap', September 1940. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Not so taken, Private Robert Lance (2/13th Battalion), a Cobar (NSW) bank worker, visited the Sphinx 'and like all "mug Aussies"', felt the urge to explore the mysterious structure.

We climbed for about 200 feet, and most of it we had to climb on our tummies, all to see an empty tomb that some blighter was buried in a few thousand years ago. I don't mind telling you we were mad with ourselves.[22]

Visiting the city's zoo, Private Leonard Pendlebury (2/7th Battalion), a Sale (Vic.) carpenter, encountered a 'real Australian native (old man 'roo). I think he knew me because he hopped up to the fence and made friends with me. I spent a bit of time with him but had to move on, much to my regret.'[23]

Sightseeing—the King Farouk memorial in Alexandria. (Argus Newspaper Collection of photographs, State Library of Victoria)

* * *

Death struck one of Gunner Edwin Edwards' mates off the battlefield, the Diggers' larrikin spirit alive and well after his service. 'One of our best and most popular sergeants, [Cecil] George Burt (2/9th Field Battery), a professional solder, died in an Alexandria hospital yesterday [23 January 1941]', Edwards forlornly recorded. Succumbing to illness (meningitis),

George was No.1 on my gun, and we would miss him sorely. I was a member of the firing party which went to his funeral today. Coming back in two trucks, racing through the crowded traffic, the boys were leaning over the sides, grabbing the fezzes from the heads of indignant pedestrians. All went reasonably well until they grabbed the fez from a Gyppo soldier. Then we had a truckload of armed soldiers after us, yelling and gesticulating wildly, but we managed to lose them in a traffic jam.[24]

‘Our chaps have had to put up with some frightful discomforts’

‘Australians are up here in the Western Desert at last’, correspondent James Aldridge typed in late September 1940.

In wide open spaces of dust rock that makes the Mallee look fertile, Australian hats are bobbing around for the first time, and it is a comforting sight. So far they are training only – using ridges of rock and sand – but they are nearly ready to take a smack at the Italians.[25]

To reach Cairo, Marshal Balbo’s army needed to traverse this torrid, hostile environment. One Digger viewed it as simply ‘miles and miles of darn-all’.[26] Most of the fighting would occur along the largely featureless coastal plain, a sparsely populated wilderness punctuated by the occasional small town or isolated fort. Rather than a sea of rolling dunes, as Hollywood might portray, Sister Janet Lindsay from the Australian Red Cross found ‘nothing very romantic about it’.[27] A ‘barren, rock strewn desert’, Captain Vernon Northwood (2/28th Battalion) described it, ‘the plateaus broken here, there and everywhere by steep *wadis* (dry watercourses we would call gorges or ravines in Australia). All of these *wadis* appear to run to the sea and finish in a little bay or sandy beach. The remainder of the coast is rugged, and rock bound.’[28]

‘Cursed is this land of dust and sand’, Sergeant Arnold Gregory (2/8th Field Ambulance) wrote of the scourge roaring in from the Sahara – what the British called a *khamsin*, the Italians a *ghibli*.[29] ‘Dust, dust and more dust – not sand, but dust and fine as flour’, an AIF driver groaned. ‘One should never complain of the Mallee again – it is a paradise compared to this place.’ ‘Take Melbourne’s worst fog’, he referenced, ‘and you have some idea of the visibility over here, and, of course, it is much more unpleasant – you smell dust, eat it, drink it, sleep in it and are part of it.’[30]

Joking how ‘life in the desert is naturally not like sitting by a cheery fireside at home’, Private Allan Anderson thought he ‘had witnessed some pretty decent dust storms at Condobolin’,

but I am not exaggerating even a little when I say they are mere gusts of fine earth compared to the blows I have seen since arriving in Egypt. They last for many, many hours and even days – and one lives in a perpetual state of coughing and choking. One rather tall tale has it that you can always tell

it is a good sort of a storm when you see a jackal a few hundred feet in the air trying to dig a burrow. The easiest and cheapest way to see Egypt is to stand at your tent door and watch it blow past.[31]

Having wondered ‘what a real desert dust storm was like’, a soldier from Mackay (Qld) exclaimed: ‘I know now’.

... when I rose this morning there was quite a breeze blowing and a haze over the countryside. This in itself did not look very threatening, and so little alarmed was I that I set out to do my washing. I had my first boilerful nicely white and just hung out on the line, and my second simmering sweetly, when up came the wind and on came the dust, clouds of it, rolling, blowing, swirling, blotting out the camp, the tent next door, everything. I raced for the tent to lash it down, then we fought with the doors to get them closed, while the wind blew the dust in our faces so that we couldn’t see what we were doing. It was of no avail. The dust blew in through holes I did not know were there, and inside the tent was as bad as outside. Outside you could see for no more than ten yards; inside you needed lamps alight. I am writing this in mid-afternoon by the light of a hurricane that has been burning all day. Men have been lost all over the camp. It is impossible to see where you are going, and if you do not know your ground you lose in no time all sense of direction. Several fellows have blundered into this tent, hopelessly lost, looking for their own ‘home’ in another part of the camp, and have no earthly idea where to find it. Out in the wind you can hardly see for the dust in your eyes and can hardly breathe for the dust in your throat. When I went down to the mess for lunch I wore my respirator, other than which there is no way of getting efficient protection. Incidentally, when at last I did arrive at the mess I found it useless to even attempt to cook any food. I lunched in my tent on a tin of salmon; salmon and grit make a tasty dish. Inside the tent everything, literally everything, including me, is covered with a thick layer of dust. It is useless to knock the dust off anything, for as fast as you knock it off it settles again. As I am writing I write a word and then blow the dust away so that I can write the next.[32]

The dreaded sirocco blows most frequently during spring and the early summer months. Having weathered one, Private Jack Bailey (2/3rd Battalion) described how ‘the sun is blotted out; you can only just see your hand in front of you. The storm will last a day or two. After the storm come

whirlwinds, which lift sheets of iron roofing from the sheds and buildings into the air, just like so many cigarette papers.'[33]

'When the wind blows up, we have sand for breakfast, luncheon and tea, and the keys of my typewriter rasp a perpetual protest', a war correspondent tapped.[34] 'The food is the trouble when these storms are raging', Private Aubrey Davey (2/33rd Battalion) affirmed. 'The bread turns brown the moment it is cut, and when margarine goes on it looks like brown sugar. Nothing like sand in stews and curries. It thickens them up a bit …'[35] 'Lunch will consist of dust, stew, and more dust – plus tea', a South Australian Digger scoffed.[36] 'One is completely helpless' against such an adversary, Vernon Northwood conceded:

We had bully beef and bread and margarine for breakfast, and I had hopes of eating the bread before it got too dirty, but I am afraid I was too optimistic. I ate and drank about half an acre of this country that day.[37]

Men and machine suffered alike. 'By hell I don't want to fight in the sand', Harold Phefley (2/14th Battalion) grumbled, 'it makes a mess of everything, especially the rifles and LMGs [light machine guns].'[38] 'The mechanics had a most difficult task in servicing the aircraft', according to Flying Officer Curwen Damyon. Aside from gruelling heat, 'often times they would have to draw a canvas cowling over them whilst overhauling the aero motors. Frequently this meant working with little else but a sense of touch.'[39]

John Campbell, a driver in the 2/28th Battalion, monitored an approaching storm. 'We could see it coming for quite a while, just one big cloud blotting out everything. One thing about it is that I can't get any dirtier with it, because I am already caked with it now.'[40] Campbell related an incident when such a storm, with visibility 'practically nil', halted a convoy.

Some of our chaps were in a convoy the other day. I don't know how many trucks were in it, but there was quite a fair number. Part of the convoy was held up for a good half-hour before one of the drivers from the back decided to go to the front and see what the trouble was. There was a hell of a dust storm blowing at the time. On inspection he found that the mob were keeping line behind the front truck and waiting for it to move off. He

discovered that the front truck was an old wrecked Italian truck on the side of the road.[41]

The dust could also bring more than passing discomfort. Lance Sergeant John Wall (2/7th Field Company) lost almost two stone (12 kg) in the desert through a form of silicosis before being invalided home in early 1941. 'It is not sand in the desert', Wall explained:

It is just fine dust like flour, and it kicks up in great clouds. When you travel at the rear of a column you cannot see anything at all in front of you. It is terrible on the eyes and it gets down to your lungs. Our chaps have had to put up with some frightful discomforts through it.[42]

Waking in his tent after a storm had subsided, Lieutenant James Fearnley (2/1st Tank Attack Regiment) found, 'the boys writing my name in the dust on my forehead. You have heard of people being snowbound, well, we were "dust-bound" for 36 hours.'[43]

'We longed at times for a tree or a green field or anything that suggested Australia', Sergeant Henry Corneliusen (2/3rd Anti-Aircraft Regiment) bared. 'More fiercely did we long for home, but that's another story.'[44]

'I am far from civilisation and well versed in the ways of nature as far as rock formations go, for I have been emulating the Australian rabbit since arrival', RAAF Leading Aircraftsman Harry Silk related, 'swinging assiduously on a pick and shovel to make myself as inconspicuous as possible'.[45] Impressed by elaborate, even 'home-like' slit trenches, correspondent John Hetherington found Australian troops 'now thoroughly dug in – literally as well as figuratively – in the great waste of dun-coloured sand in which their positions lie.'[46] 'Obliged to sleep in our clothes, which was very uncomfortable at the start', Sergeant Raymond Foster (2/3rd Battalion) and his fellow soldiers were 'used to it now'.[47]

The desert, Private John 'Mick' May (2/3rd Tank Attack Regiment) reasoned, was 'a great place for wars. Miles of sandy waste, little bits of camel tuffs [*sic*] and waddies. There is no destruction of houses or women or kiddies to get hurt over here.'[48] Gunner Cecil Spillane (2/1st Medium Regiment) echoed the sentiment. 'If a thousand wars were fought here for a million years, not one penny's worth of damage would be caused to the country, because there just ain't nothing to damage.'[49] Poeticising a 'land of

filth, of flies and fleas; home to every known disease', one Digger pictured a fresh use for the desolate tract: 'when the battle's won give Libya to the greedy Hun; For never could worse existence be, than to live in Libyan misery.'[50] The 'barren, arid, snake and scorpion-infested' desert, another Digger held, 'would be a just punishment for both dictators to be put there. I can think of no other penalty more suited to their crimes.'[51]

'It is as cold as charity'

Subzero night-time temperatures, to the surprise of many, levied further discomfort. 'Shortly before sunset a chill set in and intensifies as the night goes on. It is a hard, bitter cold, such as few Australians had ever experienced before', AIF correspondent Sergeant Ian Fitchett noted. 'You needn't believe any story saying that the nights in the desert are beautiful and warm', Sergeant Ronald da Fonte (2/8th Battalion) related in a letter to a friend in Albury (NSW).

They're not. The ones we've struck here are so cold that we very nearly shiver ourselves into a sweat! I thought I knew what cold and rain were, but I know now that I never knew anything at all about it. It certainly rains over here, and it is cold at night! We can't walk out of our tents without greatcoats on, and most of the boys are wearing their woollens to try and keep warm even during the day.[52]

Italian blankets and ground sheets became prized coverings; balaclavas rolled up during the day under helmets transformed into a woollen 'topknot' and unofficial insignia.[53] 'It is as cold as charity', Driver William Marshall (2/28th Battalion) carped, 'even though I have on two pairs of trousers, two flannels, a shirt, three sweaters, a tunic, a leather jerkin, an over coat, a balaclava, a scarf, and seven days' growth of beard.'[54] It was the 'coldest part of the world I wish to visit', Signaller Jack Parry went on. 'With a mate, I share a dozen blankets. We all dug ourselves a hole in the manner of a mole; had to, in fact, to escape the desert's chilly blast.'[55]

Darkness brought further bother. 'Believe me', Captain George Yates explained, 'the darkness of the desert is utter and complete.'[56]

'There is fun to be made here', Jack Parry wrote in jest,

We change shifts at one in the morning, and being pitch black, plus the fact we sleep a fair distance from the office, it's nothing to be wandering around

in circles for an hour or so before we eventually locate our 'hole in the ground.'[57]

Rainfall, though rare, invited a further test. Sudden winter storms could flood *wadis* and transform neighbouring desert into a bog. Troops previously cursing the dust were now wading through a quagmire, slowing all operations. By the aid of a 'mean, smoky light of a half-lit hurricane lantern', Captain Harold Conkey (2/4th Battalion) witnessed the desert's changing mood.

You remember me saying that the desert had a very hot, sulky appearance? But yesterday it weeped, for rain came on and fell in sheets – I should say three inches in thirty-six hours. It was most peculiar, for, as the great drops of rain hit the fine, powdery dust, it curled up to a height of six inches, just as if a car had raced through it, throwing up the water … So heavy has it been, that some of the Australian tents are four to five feet under water. You could imagine what a mess it has made![58]

Sergeant John Mott (2/11th Battalion) and his men struck poor weather during a three-day exercise.

The first afternoon out poured about eighty points of rain and the poor infantry had to sleep on the wet ground. Our chaps having their own vehicles were more fortunate as they had somewhere dry to lay, but owing to the nature of the country several vehicles became bogged and the drivers had to paddle around in mud and slush, trying to get them out …[59]

The arrival of the hot season, in contrast, baked metalwork until it was untouchable. 'Egypt is not what it's cracked up to be', Private Jack McIntyre (2/6th Field Ambulance) matter-of-factly declared. 'Sand, heat and flies. A few days ago, it was 127 [degrees Fahrenheit] in the shade and take it from me it was hot.'[60] Insects in plague proportion added to the Diggers' torment. 'For company I have just 1001 flies', Lance Corporal Arthur Wilesmith (9th Division Signals) an Atherton (Qld) miner, complained. 'The weather is beginning to get hot and I'm wondering if the flies increase with the temperature.'[61] The bazaar fly (*Musca sorbens*), a larger, aggressive, more vexatious relative of the common house fly, was an especially detested foe. With a predilection for laying its eggs in human excreta, it hungrily fed on secretions from soldiers' noses, eyes, or open

wounds. Food and drink were equally targeted, as Lieutenant Phillip Ferrier (2/43rd Battalion) explained to his mother.

I am still in my dugout in the front lines out in the Western Desert. The flies nearly drive us mad – green ones, black ones, grey ones, all shapes and sizes. Six or seven of them will immediately commit suicide in your tea if you leave it for a matter of seconds, but it is no use getting another cup, as they will only do the same to that. It is just as well we are not too fussy, at least, anyone who was, has had it knocked out of him by now.[62]

Writing of the pests, a correspondent expressed how 'you're never quite alone there'.

… flies crawl round eyes and nose and mouth, and when you flap them away automatically, they settle again at once – affectionate, hungry, sticky. The flies make you remember some of the Italian dead lying up there near the sea. No one can get near them. The sun is gradually drying them up. You'd always associated dying in the desert with buzzards waiting in the sky for the dying to be dead. But perhaps buzzards dislike gunfire.[63]

A Digger vented his frustration in verse:

Of all the plagues of Egypt, well the fly must be the worst,
So blasted tame and friendly, oblivious when they're cursed,
No matter what we want to do, or where we want to go,
The fly brings all his tribe along as principals of the show.[64]

'We have two entertainments here each 24 hours', another soldier quipped, 'the flies during the day and the fleas at night, the latter being so cannibalistic that they take a piece out of one and drag it away for future consumption.'[65] Writing home 'in a hole as big as a box of matches', a Tasmanian Private sighed, 'I'm still in this confounded desert and nearly eaten alive with flies.'[66] 'Sickened' by the insects, Private Leslie Denham (2/1st Pioneer Battalion) found himself 'hitting at them' in his sleep.[67] Similarly maddened, an Australian lieutenant who was a fly exterminator in civilian life began a campaign to 'drive the last fly from the desert'. War correspondent Guy Harriott narrated his crusade.

He went everywhere throughout the camps preaching his anti-fly doctrine and urging the adoption of measures designed to exterminate flies. At first,

he was regarded with mild amusement as something of a crank, but when it was seen what results he had achieved in his own area with consequent dropping off in the incidence of dysentery, both officers and men became interested ... Soon fly killing became something of a competition. An officer of a famous British regiment claimed a record bag of 1,000 in one day. Near his own quarters the lieutenant has a wire cage a metre square with a glass top. It is filled more than a foot deep with flies numbering more than a million.[68]

The desert harboured other familiar pests. 'Similar to those we have back home', Arthur Wilesmith uncovered scorpions and centipedes while digging slit trenches. 'Some of the boys have been bitten by them. They have found them in their blankets.'[69]

Water, always scarce, and at times undrinkable, brought a further hazard. Warnings were circulated about the danger of bilharzia or schistosomiasis – caused by a waterborne parasite – from as bathing in freshwater pools, streams or irrigation channels.[70] So-called 'Gippo tummy' was a common malady. Laid up, Lance Bombardier Joseph Bardi (2/7th Field Regiment) elaborated on his condition.

The last few days I have not been too well. Had an attack of one of the desert complaints – dysentery – and it gave me 'L' for a while. Couldn't eat a thing, but today I managed to get a little bread and milk down and soon will be 'jake' again. A lot of our mob have had this complaint and they say one is 'jake' after he has had it and recovered. Anyhow, I hope so, as it's pretty severe on the 'bingey'.[71]

To his dismay, Gunner William Richards (2/3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment) discovered the desert was a 'land of four fs – fleas, flies, filth and festers. The least scratch turns to desert sores, as I can well testify, being off now with them on my ankle.'[72] Even the simplest graze, scratch or insect bite, as the Diggers discovered, was easily infected in this unforgiving setting. The ulcerating wounds that followed were especially slow to heal on chafed, dry skin continually exposed to dust and wind. While the 'sores' were mostly bothersome, in a few cases where a diphtheria infection developed, they could prove fatal.[73] Private Francis Paget (2/28th Battalion) found himself 'so covered [by sores] … I couldn't

dig or get in and out of a trench … When the shelling started, I could not bend my legs because of all the boils at the back of my knees.'[74]

Similarly afflicted, Sergeant Norman McLeod's 'hands [at one time] were so covered with desert sores that I couldn't bear to wear woollen gloves, although the air was freezing.'[75] An almost universal condition, 'the only thing that comforts us is knowing that those _____ square heads have to put up with the same conditions', Sergeant William Prideaux (2/3rd Tank Attack Regiment) wrote in late 1942.[76] To treat the ailment, *The British Medical Journal* recommended covering cuts and abrasions, rest, and a diet with adequate vitamins. After a more invasive remedy, Driver Cecil Earl, a farm labourer from Moonta (SA), informed his parents of his progress: 'my boils are almost better again'.

The last one was blind, so I went to the RAP and after taking the top off it, he dug a pair of tweezers down the centre and tore it open. Did it hurt! I told him that if he treated a horse like that he would get kicked to death, and he did not seem to like it. Anyhow, it cured it.[77]

'It is better than rabbit shooting'

Positioned behind the front line in Egypt, somewhere 'God and the censor know where – and only God cares', Private Arthur Skene (2/1st Battalion), a Manly (NSW) clerk, mulled over what the coming months would bring. 'Up till now we do not know what acts of bravery will be required of us, or how we will react to the hell that must exist in battle.' Indifferent to the thought of desert warfare, Skene yearned, 'if we pull through this campaign successfully', to become an actor 'in the theatre of war on Europe's soil.'[78]

In lieu of ground action, for the moment, a moonlit sky offered some compensation – air raids. Watching enemy bomber incursions from a safe distance, Sergeant John Mott described 'a great scene ... where we are we can see the searchlights cutting through the dark of the night and the flash and subsequent explosion when the anti-aircraft batteries go into action.'[79]

'Always keen on soldiering', as his father would share, Edwin 'Blue' Sweeney had joined the militia as a 14-year-old. Now, seven years later, Private Sweeney (2/3rd Battalion), a Granville (NSW) labourer, was 'still playing soldiers', complete with the 'real excitement' of safely watching an air raid, the sky filled 'with searchlight beams and AA [anti-aircraft] shells

… It is so unreal it's like a scene from a war picture.'[80] (Shortly to experience his first battle, Sweeney was wounded on 7 January 1941 and placed on the 'seriously ill' list with a gangrenous leg. He was later killed in action in New Guinea on 22 May 1945.)

With sirens warning of an approaching raid, Private Keith Pattemore (2/2nd Battalion) awaited the 'raiders advent' from his trench, a 'maze of searchlights' combing sky and cloud.

Suddenly we hold our breath and catch in the distance an ever-swelling hum with a distinctive pulsating note that marks the beat of a third engine, and a tri-motor job [a Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 *Sparviero*] around here invariably means it is. The searchlights turn in the direction of the sound and then come red flashes on the ground in the distance, to be followed in a few seconds by the growing rumble of guns – the 'ack ack' men are in action. A curtain of crimson balls of fire appears between the raiders and their objective, as the barrage puts the barriers up. Suddenly a searchlight catches a plane in its beams, and in a trice half a dozen other rays of light fasten on to the mark, and the bomber floats in the heavens like silver moth in the centre of the crossbeams. Now the guns have a target and soon the crimson birds are booming all around the plane as it dives and climbs in an effort to evade the dazzling rays. But the busts of flame are getting too close, and his nerves can stand it no longer, so he turns and high tails it for the comparative safety of the nearest cloud, and then lights out for home, followed by the 'ack ack' guns till he is out of range.[81]

Signaller Jack Parry traced an 'Italian bomber on its way to the ground in flames',

... one of a dozen which came over, and we 'only' brought three of them down. Must speak to our antiaircraft gunners about it! The 'artillery boys' have just gone into action over yonder, and there is the usual steady thunder-like rumble. The boys in the dug-out here are just urging our boys on, with such outbursts as 'give it to the bastards'.[82]

* * *

Hearsay grew as the division's first Christmas abroad drew closer. What would the New Year hold, men wondered? 'We are making a few

preparations for Xmas cheer', Sergeant John Mott shared with his family,

… but there is some doubt as to whether we will still be here. The general rumour is that we will be moving again, and some seem to think we will be leaving Egypt altogether … at the moment there is a fair amount of activity going on within the battalion, the Padre is buying beer, sweets and foodstuffs for Christmas, while the Comforts Fund people are distributing socks, scarves, mittens and other articles to help make living conditions much improved.[83]

Gifts from home arrived. Gunner Joseph Robertson (2/5th Field Artillery Regiment) thanked his local Gilgandra community for sending a festive hamper, a 'gift from heaven', with the assurance: 'I find it very hard to be homesick. So far it is a beautiful war.'[84] Not so fortunate, his battalion's Christmas packages delayed, Sergeant Raymond Foster made do 'with tinned beef, bread and margarine, plus a rum ration'.[85]

Australian troops at this time were widely spread, from outside Alexandria to only a few miles east of Bardia. Inside a former Italian officers' mess, Corporal Roy Waters (2/2nd Battalion) improvised a celebratory meal from abandoned stores.

Didn't we cook a great Christmas dinner! Also, there were 20 gallons of dago rum. Another chap and I were cooks. The troops had tomato soup first, then macaroni stew, followed by spaghetti and prunes. I cooked for the officers, putting on mashed potatoes, boiled onions and turnips, with green peas; plenty of pudding, peaches and cream, and sweets.

'We slept all Boxing Day and at night went out on patrol in No Man's Land', 23-year-old Waters continued. 'It is exciting mooching about in the dark looking for Italians. It is better than rabbit shooting.'[86]

Western Desert campaign area, 1940-1942

CHAPTER FIVE

Bardia – ‘One of the strongest fortified positions ever tackled in modern warfare’

The war unfolded egregiously for Mussolini. After much prodding, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani (Balbo’s unfortunate successor) ponderously crossed the Egyptian frontier on 13 September 1940, only to stop at Sidi Barrani, a dusty non-descript town roughly 80 miles before the British Army base at Mersa Matruh. Digging in, Graziani’s men set to work building a series of independent fortified camps. Back in Rome, Mussolini fumed as his obdurate commander refused to budge. His woes continued in Greece, where any hope of a Blitzkrieg-style conquest was quickly dashed. Having burst across the Albanian border on 28 October, his invading army ground to a halt in the face of stiff resistance from the Greeks, freezing weather and mountainous terrain. By December 1940, a Greek counteroffensive with British support had driven the Italians back across the frontier and liberated a third of Albania. In desperation, and having rebuffed previous offers of German assistance, the Italian dictator cabled Berlin on 23 December to acquire tanks and artillery ‘at any price’.[1] Infuriated by the debacle in Greece and the pitiful toehold in Egypt, Hitler contemplated military intervention in the Balkans and Mediterranean, theatres previously outside of the Third Reich’s core interest.

Seizing the opportunity presented by Graziani’s unsound disposition, Wavell launched Britain’s first desert offensive on 9 December 1940 – an operation codenamed *Compass*. After three days of fighting, however, Lieutenant General Richard O’Connor’s force (comprising the 4th Indian

Division, 16th (British) Infantry Brigade, 7th Armoured Division, 7th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) and the 36,000-odd men of the Mersa Matruh garrison) ruptured the Italian front line. Notwithstanding determined pockets of resistance, isolated Italian camps fell in quick succession. Two Italian divisions caught in the open desert between Sidi Barrani and Mersa Matruh also surrendered. Mussolini's immediate threat to Egypt lay in tatters.

Correspondent John Hetherington viewed the aftermath of the fighting.

A squadron of British tanks had swept in from another direction, and, catching the pre-occupied Italian gunners unawares, won a swift victory over them. I walked on to the ridge among the Italian guns. Boxes of shells lay behind them, just as they had been left by the gunners. One crew lay dead behind their gun – three green-uniformed Italians – in the grotesque postures of violent death.[2]

'Believe me, the news you hear is rather an underestimate, if anything, of results obtained', Leading Aircraftsman Harry Silk wrote of the routed army.

I have been over some of the places mentioned and the state of disorder and panic which exists among the enemy is terrible. Prisoners are herded by the thousands and nowhere are there any signs of the well-disciplined, efficient army about which so many boasts have been made … Discarded machine-guns, rifles, cars, tanks, equipment and stores are all mute evidence of the panic which must have seized the enemy; they not only retreated, they ran. With no transport to convey them, with a lack of fighting material, they proved 'easy meat' for the mopping-up parties.[3]

Sergeant Ian Fitchett, too, was struck by the mass of discarded enemy equipment as he travelled west from Sidi Barrani.

… there is barely a yard of the way, that is not littered with smashed transport and abandoned guns, ammunition, light automatic rifles and equipment, hand grenades, clothing, and a hundred and one oddments of personal gear … The litter defaces the barren countryside and in many places dead still lie where they fell, surrounded by thousands of rifles and equipment of their surrendered comrades … our party wandered over the crest amidst the carnage and dead lying by their guns … It was one of the

few places the enemy had held with any determination, and they had died hard. The amount of equipment left here was amazing. Nearly every gun was being served to the last, many having been reloaded as death caught the teams.… The most pathetic sight were thousands of letters and photographs blowing over the plain. They had fallen from abandoned packs and haversacks burst open by tanks travelling over them in hot pursuit.[4]

The stunned Italian prisoners that Sapper Norman Armstrong (2/2nd Field Company) encountered were 'perfectly friendly towards us, and I'm sure they are relieved it is over … The navy and the RAF did such a thorough job in breaking the lines of communication from Libya that the troops had no water for nearly three days.'[5]

'In Bardia we are and here we stay'

O'Connor's next objective – and the Australian 6th Division's combat debut – was the fortified coastal port of Bardia, an isolated Libyan coastal fortress some 15 miles across the Egyptian frontier. The division's commanding officer, Major General Iven Mackay, was an able and decorated First World War veteran. Rigorously drilled, as we have seen, his division was nevertheless under strength and short of equipment – hardly ideal for its first assignment. It was short one of its three field artillery regiments – and of the two available, one was equipped with obsolete 60-pounder guns and 4.5-inch howitzers. Mackay also lacked an anti-tank regiment and machine gun battalion while the bulk of the 6th Divisional Cavalry was 200 miles distant besieging the Italian stronghold at Giarabub (now Jaghbub). Yet what the division lacked in equipment was more than compensated for by its *esprit de corps*; if anything, there was a feeling of dread within the ranks of arriving late at the front after the fighting had ended. Having run his eye over hundreds of soldiers' letters, a British censor agreed:

There is no doubt these Australians are real fighting men. Even if their past history had not been sufficient to demonstrate that, their letters show that they are all anxious to get into action … God help the Dagoes when they do![6]

British forces began assembling outside Bardia on 19 December 1940, preparing to storm the fortress. General Richard O'Connor originally hoped the combined hammering of naval, air and land bombardments on enemy

stockpiles might be enough to entice the garrison to surrender. Italian commanders, conversely, assumed the attacking army would not launch an assault, but instead rely on the age-old siege tactic of starving the fortress into submission. Their engineers had transformed Bardia, once a quiet fishing village, into a desert citadel, impressively carving an 18-mile defensive arc into the landscape (with Tobruk, 60 miles further west, similarly protected). Bardia appeared, at least on paper, a formidable obstacle. Its commander, General Annibale Bergonzoli, boasted that it was 'impregnable'.

Bardia's outer defences, bookended by steep *wadis* and rugged coastal cliffs, comprised 80 subterranean perimeter posts arranged in two concentric rings, with anti-tank guns and machine guns, plus minefields, an anti-tank ditch and a continuous apron of barbed wire. The Italians, as Major Henry Marshall (2/7th Battalion) recalled from a German POW camp, 'had made the terrain inside and outside the wire as bald as a billiard ball and had constructed concrete posts along the wire in two rows – each post being about 300 yards apart. It was impossible to use any cover as there wasn't any.'[7] A secondary line of posts and individual strongholds inside the wire offered further defence in depth.

The town itself was divided in two. Upper Bardia, on the northern side of a *wadi*, contained a military barracks and headquarters, houses, a church, wireless station and lighthouse. A steep road wound down to lower Bardia where further barracks sat beside a sheltered anchorage. The garrison of some 40,000 troops, the Italian XXIII Corps, was equipped with 130 (mainly light) tanks and 400 pieces of artillery.

A rousing message left Mussolini's hand as battle approached.

I have given you a difficult task but one suited to your courage and experience as an old and intrepid soldier, the task of defending the fortress of Bardia to the last. I am certain that 'electric beard' [so named because of Bergonzoli's vivid red whiskers] and his brave soldiers will stand, at whatever cost, faithful to the last.

'I am aware of the honour', Bergonzoli replied, 'and I have today repeated to my troops your message – simple and unequivocable. In Bardia we are and here we stay'.[8] The 'helter-skelter blitzkrieg in the Western Desert has

finished', Launceston's *Examiner* announced. Moreover, the 'Italians have decided to stick in their toes at Bardia and give battle seriously.'[9]

Captured maps and aerial photographs gave Mackay a broad understanding of Bardia's defences as he prepared for a frontal assault. Nightly reconnaissance patrols, proudly upholding the tradition of the 1st AIF, yielded valuable details of the obstacles standing before his troops. Compass in hand, Major Ian Campbell (2/1st Battalion) enjoyed 'the most exciting times' in leading 'two special reconnoitring patrols to locate and investigate' the outer defences. Two subsequent '10-mile night marches in sandshoes', Campbell wrote, 'were [as] successful, as they were vital'.[10] The positions of the underground enemy posts were marked with tufts of camel bush and strips of rifle cleaning rag as makeshift signposts on an otherwise featureless desertscape.

During a separate sally on 29 December 1940, 35-year-old Acting Corporal Eric 'Snowy' Goble (2/6th Battalion), a Palmerston-born (NZ) spray painter was hit in the back by rifle fire. An inquiry into his death followed. In Sergeant Leo O'Brien's words:

We were returning at daylight from the patrol when we were attacked and received orders to retreat. I saw Corporal Goble hit ... He fell to the ground. He was bleeding through his tunic about level with the kidneys. He went immediately to the ground and did not move. As we retreated I had him in view for a few minutes ... He was left as dead.[11]

Captain Keith Picken (2/6th Battalion) testified that a second witness had seen Goble step forward and throw his last Mills bomb (grenade) when he was shot. Later patrols failed to recover his body. No grave was found, and no news of him being taken prisoner was received.[12] Private Norman Beames (2/6th Battalion) later recovered a wristwatch believed to be Gobles' from the body of a dead Italian, returning it to his mourning relatives.[13]

* * *

New Year's Eve 1940. From his position outside Bardia, Corporal Vivian Dawson (2/3rd Battalion) penned a letter to his brother Herb in Dubbo.

At present, I'm sitting in a hole somewhere in the Western Desert. It's winter here now and is it cold! I'll say it is! ... Well, we have not yet been into action, but we have been mighty close to it. We are within range of their heavy guns, and it's nothing to see the dirt and stones flying from their shells. Our guns have been shelling them for days. Our platoon – 14 – has been out on two night patrols. Our task was to locate their wire and cut it. This we did, but we were seen by a couple of Dagoes, who woke all the other Dagoes in the place. Well, Herb, we had a very lively half-hour before we got away. They had machine-guns and rifles firing everywhere. We just lay on the ground, expecting any minute to stop one. After a while the firing died down and we were able to get out without anyone being hit. It's not a very pleasant experience lying down listening to the bullets whistling just over your head. The Dagoes are very poor shots; I'm sure if they had been in our position none of them would have got away. Three chaps from this battalion were killed in an air raid a few days ago. The planes came back again yesterday, and three were shot down before they could drop any bombs.[14]

On the following moonless night, 1 January 1941, Ian Campbell's intelligence officer cautiously laid 5,000 yards of signal wire as a guide for troops assailing the western perimeter.[15] The anti-tank ditch in this sector was less formidable than in other sectors and a gentle rise in the terrain favoured the use of tanks and artillery. Confident in his planning, Mackay set a date for the assault – 3 January – and issued Operation Order No. 1, an exhaustive appreciation specifying objectives, methods, signals and codewords.

'Part of one of the world's best armies'

The six Australian infantry battalions selected to assault Bardia received 24 hours' notice before 'going in'. No soldiers, they were briefed, had ever tackled such 'a place so well fortified'.

Letters to home were pertinently written, 'just in case'. 'We had had a fairly easy time for four or five days before the scrap', Private Thomas Mawhinney (2/2nd Battalion) drafted, spending the 'day before the battle cleaning our guns, etc.'[16]

‘We are about to attack him’, Major Ian Campbell informed his wife in Moss Vale, from his position roughly 4,000 yards beyond the Italian defences. An occasional shell from within Bardia whistled overhead as Campbell composed his letter.

… For the past 10 days I have had little sleep, hardly any washes, and have only eaten bully beef, and biscuits, which, by the way, are very good for the health. … My despised balaclava is always on, and I look like nothing on earth, as we naturally sleep in our clothes, and rarely change anything, having only one gallon of water per day to play with … We sleep in holes in the ground where we can find enough earth, as it is the only place to keep warm.[17]

In the nervous hours preceding battle, a Digger in Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Eather’s 2/1st Battalion addressed a reassuring note to his father in Sydney, correspondence that would arrive long after the battle had ended.

Dear Dad, if this is to be my last letter, Dad, I’d like to write it to you. It must be obvious at home that the tempo of the war here is increasing, and by the time you receive this, the censor and God willing, your small son will be in the front or the middle of the battle. I know how anxiously you and the family wait the meagre letters you receive, and I thought that since I can no longer control the happenings about me, that it would be better to warn you that it may be some considerable time before you may hear from me again. Otherwise, you would be wondering why the hell I don’t write. Now, don’t, for goodness sake, be anticipating the worst. I have no idea what is before us, or what part we are to play in the picture as a whole, but I do know that I’m physically and mentally prepared for anything, and part of one of the world’s best armies.[18]

Two days of aerial and naval bombardment preceded Mackay’s push. As had been the case at Sidi Barrani, Italian naval support was non-existent. The *Regia Aeronautica* (Italian Royal Air Force) too, was largely absent – a welcome surprise for the Australian infantry. Holding the initiative, Britain’s much smaller Desert Air Force bombed forward Italian airfields and strafed fortress strongpoints with impunity. Mackay’s artillery was moved into new positions during the night of 2 January. All activity in the area to be attacked was reduced to a minimum while deception activities kept the Italians guessing where the British would strike. Surprise would be

Mackay's most powerful weapon. 'We did everything to obtain it,'Brigadier Francis Berryman (6th Division General Staff Officer) later lectured.

This was our first operation – the initiation of the 2nd AIF and we had a clear-cut problem and a perfectly free hand to carry it out. We were anxious to avoid the confusion of ANZAC, of Fromelles and Pozieres or first Bullecourt, so our preparation was as thorough as we could make it.[19]

Both Berryman and Mackay were determined that Bardia would not be a reprise of the calamitous Gallipoli landing of 1915.

Stand to on 3 January was set at 3.30 a.m. Some men managed to snatch a few hours' sleep. 'The cold was something terrific', a sapper from Sydney noted, 'sometimes we would get up and move about to keep the blood circulating. But we could not move much for fear of alarming the Italians'.[20] Private Thomas Mawhinney enjoyed a 'hot meal brought up to us in hot boxes, which was very nice. It wasn't long till we were over the start line and going at them – a bit worked up as you may well imagine.'[21] A tot of rum helped to steady nerves.

H-hour neared. Well-rehearsed procedures were brought into play. Watches were synchronised. Equipment was rechecked; bayonets were affixed to .303 Lee Enfield Number 1, Mark III rifles. A piece of white cloth was pinned to each man's back – a recognition aid first employed at Gallipoli. Weighed down by helmets, greatcoats, gas masks, blankets, ammunition, grenades and three days' rations of biscuits and tinned beef, soldiers studied the sky for signs of the opening barrage. Engineers and pioneers on the ground, meanwhile, edged stealthily forward to breach the outer apron of barbed wire using explosive charges called 'Bangalore torpedoes'.

'I sent bullet after bullet at heads and swore every time I missed'

'The kite actually went up at 5.30 a.m. with the artillery opening fire', Lieutenant Courtney Swinton (2/2nd Battalion) chronicled,

and the 1st Battalion went through and cut the wire and established a bridgehead. We started out at a quarter to 6 [a.m.], by which time the enemy gunners were popping a few over where we were and along the line on which we had to march to the wire. We were very lucky, though – not more

than two casualties, and we had to go over 2000 yards and the shell fire was pretty thick. The fellows were great. No one even faltered and quite a number were singing and laughing and cracking jokes. … It was still dark until after we had reached and passed the wire, but as soon as daylight came the gunners could see us and they started to drop the shells round us – but we were lucky and not many were hit.[22]

'What a marvellous sight it was to see the whole horizon aflame with gun flashes', Private Harold 'Rol' Rae (16th Infantry Brigade) pictured, 'but what a terrible noise, too! The crash of the guns, the whistle of shells overhead, and the explosions made my heart jump about 15 feet at first'.[23]

Enemy shells fell in reply. Two men in the 2/5th Battalion were killed, a third was wounded. The approach march began around 7 a.m. 'Yours truly thought his number was up', Private James 'Jim' Gowen (2/1st Battalion) confided to a friend. 'Boy, was I scared! The other chaps were laughing and singing, and I think that gave me courage to keep going.'[24]

Lugging a Lewis machine gun, Private Mawhinney 'sent a burst or two into the air to see that she was OK, and from then on we all seemed to be as cool as could be and were soon at them.'[25] Each section had a machine gun; each platoon was equipped with a two-inch mortar and a Boys .55-inch anti-tank rifle. Private Allan Edwards (2/3rd Battalion), a former timber cutter from Corowa, was 'armed to the teeth. I had six Bren gun magazines, 150 rounds for my rifle, and two hand grenades. We also had the anti-tank rifle and ammo'.[26]

'1 never heard such a row as I did the night of the attack', Private Raymond Newson (2/1st Battalion) informed his parents.

First our artillery would open up, and then theirs, while we were underneath both. We had shells raining around us; in fact, they threw everything at us but the guns. However, we kept going and soon had them on the run. There was a couple of times when I wished any tin hat was big enough to crawl under, especially when a couple of shells landed about (believe it or not), four or five feet behind me.[27]

The division's immediate objective was to silence enemy perimeter Posts 45 and 47. The 2/2nd Battalion would then trail tanks through a rift blown in the perimeter before wheeling south. The 2/3rd Battalion, next to enter the fray, would follow, then drive east to the top of the escarpment

overlooking the bay. The second phase of the operations would begin with Brigadier Stanley Savige's 17th Brigade trailing a creeping barrage to secure perimeter posts in the southeast. Should an Italian soldier wish to surrender, all ranks were acquainted with the Italian phrases 'hands up' and 'open your hands'. They were also warned that souveniring – that most Australian of pastimes – would not be tolerated.[28]

'Obviously every man was on his toes and remained so until we reached the Start Line', Corporal Thomas 'Bunny' McWilliams (2/2nd Battalion) penned.

We had a few miles to march to that spot. Of course, strict silence had to be maintained and, naturally no smoking (and that's when one sure does feel like smoking). It was really a wonderful achievement. Even though everyone felt like smoking and making a noise of some kind to break that awful silence, not a cigarette glare was to be seen and no avoidable noise to be heard. That silence reigned till after we were correctly lined out, and then it suddenly ended, and what a tremendous change as our land batteries opened up and the Navy began shelling the Bardia positions and to add to the noise and flashes of these our air force began dropping 'eggs.' The zero hour had arrived! What a noise (or roar). To make oneself heard it was a case of yelling at the top of the voice, even though the listeners were right at one's elbow. And what flashes! A newspaper could almost be read by the illumination. To be quite truthful, I believe a lot of 'the boys' did feel a bit out of plumb in that deathly silence before zero hour! But when those guns opened up, did they make up for it? I'll say they did. There was a definite rush to light cigarettes (lights didn't matter now). Roars of 'Whack-O,' 'You Beauty,' 'Yippee,' 'Wa-hoo', and in fact every other type of roar, yell or call ever uttered were introduced as well as songs starting up from anywhere and everywhere, and had there been some person looking on, merely as a spectator, I'm sure he'd have thought the Aussies were probably going to some kind of a picnic instead of a battle. Of course, the Itie batteries opened up immediately after ours (more noise), and the only time the singing, etc., waned was when a shell chanced to land close and may be knock one or two of our men over. From then on, the seriousness of the 'job' was appreciated.[29]

A veteran nicknamed 'Old Picador' reckoned the early stages of the fighting,

was fiercer than anything I knew in the last war. I don't know where we would have been but for the wonderful English tanks. The Italians opened a withering fire when we reached the barbed wire, but the tanks rolled up in a mass and gave us shelter.[30]

Men's reactions to the harsh reality of war naturally varied in a bloody classroom favouring quick learners. 'A novice under shellfire', Ron Chambers (2/8th Field Company) discovered he could 'hit Mother Earth pretty quickly' upon the whistle of an approaching projectile.[31]

Reginald Parbery (2/3rd Battalion) found that 'you have no time to think or be frightened. You just go forward and as you do so the barrage lifts, but the Dago in front is trying to get you all the time.'[32]

'Believe me, those few hours were the worst I've ever experienced', a junior artillery officer confided to his father, 'and had it not been for the mutual comforting effect of each other's company I shudder to contemplate what would have been our mental state at daylight.'[33]

An emotion washed over Private William Nagle (2/1st Battalion) 'greater than all the thrills I ever got in a theatre'.

The first stage of that advance was devilishly slow. Our artillery was laying a barrage in front of us, and the swishing noise of the shells going over our heads seemed to be urging us on, but to do so meant to be caught in our own barrage. The Italians were sending over a few shells, too, and, believe me, it was warm. We seemed to be surrounded by bursting shells. The bursting flashes have a blinding nature about them ... About this time we went to ground and waited for the barrage to lift. When it did so we went forward through their wire, took one post, scrambled down one side and up the other of a tank trap and took our second enemy post. This only took half an hour, but to me it seemed like hours. It was during that time a shell splinter ripped the back of my right leg, but it only left a small gash which I forgot about in the excitement. During the day we kept pushing forward, capturing thousands of prisoners while doing so.[34]

Amid 'plenty of thrills', Lieutenant Alexander 'Sandy' Mair (2/2nd Field Regiment) recounted 'a nasty baptism of fire the very first day.'

I tried to go out with 'Buddy', my signaller to a lot of abandoned Dago trucks to use as an observation post. We crawled to them in a shallow trench

and got to within about 20 yards of them when all of a sudden – z-i-i-i-i-p – bang, and the first shell came over at us. After that they fell thick and fast, it's very frightening at first, but you don't have time to think about it. We were forced to go back – one fell within ten feet from me – thank goodness we had that bit of a trench – anyway, my guns fired the first shot in the regiment, and I was very pleased about it. The Dago is a very good and accurate gunner, and I admire and respect his artillery very much indeed.[35]

A runner preserving communications between company headquarters and advancing platoons, Private Denis 'Snow' Atkinson (2/45th Light Aid Detachment), a Moree (NSW) carpenter, was stirred by the infantry's performance. He was also unperturbed by the enemy shelling.

Our boys had to follow the British mechanised units but they finished up by taking posts without the British, who expressed great praise for us, and we are a bit wrapped up in our own abilities … The British, some of whom were in the evacuation of Dunkirk, told us that we went through as heavy a barrage as they had seen, but if it never gets any worse then I won't mind. I imagined it would be ten times more severe than it really was.[36]

'Rearing to go', Private Allan Edwards watched as troops fell, yet 'the lines of men never wavered – they kept going.'

If one got hit, his mate alongside stuck his rifle up in the ground near him (so that the stretcher-bearers would find him), and he would re-join his lines. As we passed different boys who had been hit, they would wave and say 'Good luck, Dig'.[37]

Seemingly oblivious to the bombardment, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Chilton (2/2nd Battalion) watched his men 'laughing and joking' as they advanced into the unknown, indifferent to the danger.

They were like boys going to a picnic, but some of them did not come back. They were so eager, that some of them even got ahead of the tanks ... Anyone who says he enjoys a battle is a liar. On the other hand, I can say I was not as frightened as I thought I would be. We had practised so often, and in some ways it went like a practice. All our training seems to have been on the right lines.[38]

‘It would have done the bloody cold-footed good to have seen our platoon singing “Advance Australia Fair”’, Private Thomas Mawhinney reasoned, ‘and we were not drunk either, and there was a lot of stuff flying about, too, and that is something that will forever live in my mind.’[39] Between shell bursts, Harold Rae also heard infantryman singing – ‘in a great chorus’ – motion picture hits from the day including ‘The Donkey’s Serenade’ and ‘South of the Border’. In the dawn light a shell exploded.

I saw parts of a man blown 15 feet into the air, but the singing went on. It moved me to tears of joy to see these men so cheerful in the face of such heavy odds; their courage I’ll never forget, and I’ve never felt so proud for being one of them.[40]

(Harold Rae was later captured in Crete and spent the remainder of the war in a German POW camp.)

Private Jack ‘Ripper’ Bynon, a battalion stretcher bearer, vowed never to forget the first day at Bardia.

We went in singing and cheering. It was the greatest sight I have ever seen. It was just breaking dawn when the artillery let go, and immediately the engineers blew up the wires. Then things went mad. Our battalion led the way, with two others following, backed up by British tanks.[41]

Casualties climbed. Unaccustomed to the macabre sight of dead and wounded soldiers, Private Alan Hackshaw (2/11th Battalion) noted several bodies covered with blankets. In naive innocence someone uttered: ‘I bet they’re cold sleeping out there.’[42]

Sergeant Gordon Blanchard (2/2nd Battalion) lost a member of his section shortly after leaving the start line.

He collected two machine gun bullets – one in the shoulder and the other in the chest ... I think he is O.K. [James] ‘Jim’ Russell also got a bullet through the neck at this stage, but I believe it is only a flesh wound and he is alright. The enemy sent over plenty of shells at us, thickened up with machine gun fire; but it had no more effect on our boys than if it was rain. They were magnificent. They went through it singing and laughing and the only time they halted was to light cigarettes. The enemy maintained their fire until we got within a few yards of them and then they put up their hands. They won’t face the cold steel. Our platoon (30 men) reached our objective at 10 a.m.

and then consolidated. During that time, we captured about 700 men, hundreds of machine guns and field guns.[43]

Private Lawrence 'Len' Ridgewell (2/3rd Battalion), a Manilla (NSW) butcher, watched Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Eather motion platoons forward using his walking stick.

The lines of the men ahead of us looked ghost like. You would see them and then they would disappear for a minute. That was our start in our first battle. We kept moving forward at a fast pace and kept just ahead of the enemy barrage. An odd shell dropped among our ranks. Our first sight of Italian soldiers was a dark mass of prisoners grouped together near the barbed wire. Then the battle started in earnest with small shell and machine gun bullets … We took no notice but just kept marching forward at them. This seemed to unnerve the enemy completely and up would go a white flag.[44]

Rising numbers of Italians came forward to surrender. 'As it began to get light', Private Clyden 'Cliff ' Saltmarsh (2/5th Battalion) remembered,

one could see the dagoes coming out – thousands of them – as far as you could see, there was nothing to be seen but dagoes coming out with hands up or waving white flags, while there were others throwing back everything they had. We were shelled very heavily at times the first day.[45]

Breaking down the sides of the anti-tank ditch and 'de-bunking' minefields allowed the 24 heavily armoured Matilda tanks of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment to press ahead through the breach before swinging right along the outer string of defensive posts.[46] The sight of tanks trundling forward to engage individual positions redoubled Keith Pattemore's confidence. In the background rang a strange racket: 'the sound of singing oddly mixed with the lethal sound of warfare.'[47]

Single-mindedly operating his weapon, 34-year-old Gunner Earl Pickering (2/6th Australian Cavalry Regiment), a Paramatta labourer, later maintained that 'one never thinks of the bullets whizzing around, and as the shells come screeching along you can hear them cutting their way through the air; but it makes one a bit nervy when it is over.' The hum of an aircraft, however, was more alarming.

… everyone hits the ground and tries to crawl under his hat; and then when you notice the marks on the plane and find that it is British, the sigh of

relief can be heard many miles away, as we all seem more afraid of planes than anything else. The bombs make an awful din, too.[48]

Instructions were later issued about shooting at enemy aircraft (using anti-aircraft guns or small arms) only once 'an aircraft is seen to be committing a definite hostile act' and the aircraft is 'identified beyond all reasonable doubt to be hostile by its national markings.'[49]

After moving through the outer defences and veering south, a sergeant (2/2nd Battalion) from Goodooga in northern New South Wales met heavy shellfire, blanketing the battlefield in stirred-up dust. 'We steered by compass through the dust, through which bullets were humming like bees', he apprised correspondent Gavin Long.

Everyone just went on. The Italians blazed away until we were close, and then came out with their hands over their heads. We found ourselves well along a *wadi* with two sections – perhaps sixteen men – and nothing but prisoners in sight. The Colonel came along in a Bren carrier, and told us we had gone too far, but it was the devil's own job stopping the men.[50]

Crawling to a ridge-top on his hand and knees, 36-year-old Sergeant Lawson Wilson crouched in the open, 'amid hellish fire', directing mortar fire against a battery of enemy field guns, mortars and machine guns.

I put twenty-one mortar bombs into the field gun battery. I could see they were silenced, because I watched the muzzles and saw that they were not firing. Next, I lobbed lines of bombs along a wall behind which mortars and automatics were placed. The range was 600 to 750 yards. It is a very accurate weapon. When we advanced, I could see the vanes of our bombs all round the gun positions. Our bombs have a much deadlier burst than the Italian mortar bombs.[51]

'It was one of the gamest things I have heard', Wilson's CO later remarked.[52] Elsewhere on the field of battle, Private Allan Edwards found himself in 'a gully where the shrapnel was heavy'.

… In this place we got the full force of their machine guns. They zipped and whined past us, and the narrow escapes were marvellous. One fellow got his haversack torn to bits with a bullet, another had one through his flapping tunic, and yet another chap had one off his steel helmet. In this gully we went to ground the first and last time in our advance on Bardia.

There were heads sticking up above the stone wall which was our objective and we pumped lead at them. Honestly, I didn't think I could be so bloodthirsty. I sent bullet after bullet at heads and swore every time I missed.[53]

Taken by surprise, some enemy posts fought hard; others quickly capitulated. A Digger (wounded on the first day) helped to seize one.

[Italians] started to come up from below with their hands up and we searched them and sent them back to the rear. I found a grenade in the pocket of one of them and when I took it from his pocket, he snatched it back, saying something in his own language. Thinking he was going to blow us both up, and the safety catch on the rifle being on, I was just resigned to having to use the bayonet on him when the grenade came apart, it was full of cigarettes instead of explosives much to my relief. The next [soldier] was only about 17. He was shaking with fear and white as a ghost and had been wounded on the hand. I felt sorry for him and gave him a smoke, tried to tell him that he would be alright and there would be no more war for him.[54]

A youthful Australian soldier, his face bloodied from an explosion, stormed another position, lobbing grenades and charging with fixed bayonet. 'I jumped into one dugout and found an Italian colonel dead. His face was covered with lather. He was killed while his batman was shaving him.' A different post surrendered to a pair of New South Welshmen; 'The Italians came tumbling up like rabbits out of a burrow.'[55] The concrete strongholds were often in a deplorable state, with sanitation almost non-existent. A good many of the defenders were infested with lice, some were stricken with dysentery, and many were in no fit state to fight. A signalman watched six men 'trying to carry one of their comrades whose body was covered in blood, but they are weak and can hardly carry him.'[56]

* * *

Six Italian M13/40 tanks attacked 2/3rd Battalion headquarters in the morning, freeing a group of close to 500 prisoners. 'We thought that our particular war was over', Lieutenant Charles Terrey (2/3rd Battalion) divulged: 'It's no fun at all to be getting a caning from tanks.'[57] Nearby

British tank crews who were ‘enjoying a brew’ dismissed news of the Italian armour as an ‘Antipodean exaggeration.’[58] Instead it was the infantrymen who were first to tackle the enemy tanks. Caught unaware, Captain Ian Hutchinson assumed the tanks were friendly until his rifle was blown out of his hand by a solid shot round, his runner, Private Peter Tambakis, mortally wounded. Racing toward the oncoming Italian tanks, Private Harold Hergenhan (2/3rd Battalion), a Bega milk carter, hurled a grenade at one, only to have it catch on his leather jerkin and explode, killing him instantly. Like Hutchinson, Lieutenant Ian Fulton misidentified the enemy tanks. Realising his mistake, Fulton leapt onto one, firing his pistol through the open turret hatch.[59]

Engaging enemy armour with a Boys anti-tank rifle, Lieutenant Leslie Calman was killed before the three 2-pounder guns of the 16th Brigade Anti-Tank Company (mounted portée on trucks) moved into action. Calman’s last words, possibly regarding his own demise, were ‘stupid bastard’.[60] Corporal Arthur Pickett’s 2-pounder promptly knocked out four tanks at short range. The fifth vehicle sprayed his truck with machine gun fire, wounding Pickett and killing Gunner Private Walter Dawes. Surviving members of Pickett’s crew destroyed the fifth tank before the sixth one targeted their truck, fatally wounding Private Edwin ‘Teddy’ Grant. This last tank soon fell victim to anti-tank fire, the solid 2-pounder shells easily piercing the armour and inflicting horrific injuries on the crew.[61] Before the engagement, the anti-tank company had been the butt of jokes among the infantry, having only recently received their weapons after training with dummy portées and imitation guns. All mockery stopped immediately.[62] Pickett was later awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) for his role in defeating the attack.[63]

In one of the many heroic acts, stretcher bearers Private Roy Tilbury and Corporal Ray Marney (both 2/2nd Battalion) were commended by witnesses for their ‘endeavours to assist the wounded without any regard to their own personal safety’.

Their disregard of danger was remarkable, and their outstanding achievement was their attending to Captain George Godbold in the face of machine gun fire from enemy tanks. Captain Godbold was hit, and he ordered his Company HQ forward, he was left with Corporal Marney and Private Tilbury, enemy tanks fired on them with machine guns and

approached to a distance of about 40 yards. The stretcher bearers continued their work without any regard to the enemy. A shell exploded near the tanks. The tanks withdrew and the stretcher bearers moved forward with Captain Godbold. Their behaviour throughout the whole of the action showed gallantry of the highest order.[64]

Both Tilbury and Marney received the Military Medal, two of eight such medals awarded to battalion personnel at Bardia. Writing to Walter Dawes' parents in Dubbo, Captain Hugh Nelson (2/1st Battalion) commiserated his death, in a 'very gallant engagement', which had saved headquarters personnel 'from certain destruction … in a brilliant manner.'[65]

* * *

Corporal Clarrie Burke, whose section had become isolated while fighting in a deep *wadi*, and having taken 600 prisoners, was himself taken prisoner by an Italian tank crew.

We were marched back and six other tanks appeared. The tank crews were absolute fanatics with battle fervour sticking out of their eyes. They are different types to the infantry 'mob'. The tank crews argued what to do with us, whether to take us on the tanks or shoot us – it was touch and go. Luckily our prisoners spoke up for us and they desisted.[66]

Another Digger fell prisoner after his platoon found itself in an apparently quiet sector. Rummaging for keepsakes along a *wadi*, he turned to find half a dozen enemy soldiers with weapons pointed at him. Marched off, somewhat of an oddity given the number of garrison troops who surrendered that day, he spent several hours in confinement.[67] A subsequent 19th Brigade analysis warned of losing focus. 'Remember the battle is not won till all enemy have been captured or killed ... Sightseeing, souveniring etc. must not be allowed while the battle is in progress.'[68]

Reaching his initial objective, Corporal 'Bunny' McWilliams sheltered in an anti-tank ditch. Once the Italian artillery found their range, he recounted, 'they literally speaking threw everything they had at us.'

This concentrated bombardment continued for hours and, boy, was it severe! During this time, I asked a Corporal friend for a light off his cigarette. His hand was shaking like a leaf. I said, 'Steady there, Jack;

you're a bit shaky on the shanks, you know.' He replied (as outright as humanly possible), 'I've been like that for bloody two hours, Bun' ... After we had left that position some personnel from the Intelligence section came up to look it over, and they found and captured an Itie officer and six men concealed in a well camouflaged dug-out within the fort we had occupied, and we later learned they were in communication by phone with their batteries. Hence the reason they threw so much at us. This officer was directing their fire. I might add, it was at that, particular post that I got my crack on the shin with a small piece of shrapnel, and I there also bandaged it and thought it was of no consequence at all. I learned differently later.[69]

McWilliams was evacuated with shrapnel wounds to both legs. (He subsequently fought in Greece and was discharged in Australia in December 1943 after recurrent hospitalisations for deteriorating mental health.)

Sergeant John Webb (2/2nd Battalion) 'came through OK, but it was hell coming through'. 'Pinned down in a little drain by shellfire, from 9.30 a.m. to 3 p.m.', he was forced to 'stay there until the guns were silenced. Boy! Was I pleased to hear the last of them. I was just about a wreck by that time.'[70]

* * *

Heroic and chivalrous acts transcended sides. Sapper Richard Beilby (2/3rd Field Company) witnessed 'some hideous wounds' in an improvised aid post. He passed his last cigarette to an enemy combatant whose shoulder was 'shot off '. As a token of gratitude, he was given a fountain pen that he later used in his diary.[71] Surprised to see an Italian doctor (and two stretcher-bearers) emerge from a trench and walk towards his platoon, a Sydney private (2/1st Battalion) ceased firing.

He walked calmly to where two of our men were lying wounded. The doctor brought both men through our line and attended to them. Then he walked back and picked up two wounded Italians. I talked to him in French when he was with us. He said there was a brotherhood among doctors. I found a medical officer of another battalion today using a captured Italian mobile surgery with three Italian medical orderlies standing by. He said that an Italian doctor who was captured worked 24 hours among our own and Italian wounded, and that the orderlies were excellent men.[72]

Callousness also raised its ugly head. ‘A great problem for many reasons’, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Chilton later reported, was the large number of Italian prisoners, the linguistic barrier, and their apparent inability to ‘withstand pain.’

With some diffidence I would point out that some RMOs refuse to treat Italian wounded. As a consequence, large numbers of necessity came under my care. For humane reasons I consider that these poor devils require some treatment whenever it is possible to give it.[73]

Private Mawhinney’s progress, in the meantime, ‘was very rapid indeed and we took what seemed to us to be millions of prisoners.’ With scant regard for his enemy, he related an unfortunate incident.

The Italian is definitely not a soldier, as they had wonderful concrete pill boxes built, but could not stand the sight of the bayonet. The taking of the first lot of prisoners caused what has since been a great joke among our chaps. A crowd of them had thrown down their arms and were coming out with their hands up. When the first Dago stepped up alongside one of our chaps, he lowered his hands or something and our man said, ‘You would, eh!’ and downed him with a beautiful left hook. The others cringed down and it took us two or three minutes to get them all marching again, so we didn’t ‘job’ anymore. Strong as they had things, they did not have them well laid out tactically. We also found that once we fired back at a machine gun, they would leave their gun and get right down their hole. They are mostly conscripts and I don’t think they want to fight, but they do so till we get close to them.[74]

‘I could feel brother death breathing on my neck’

Italian artillery fire, generally accurate and harrowing as we have read, was often less than effective, as Sergeant Kenneth Lucas (2/11th Battalion) experienced during his ‘baptism of fire’. It was ‘rather an unpleasant experience to have shells lobbing, round one, but they were not very dangerous and had to land mighty close to create casualties.’[75] Similarly unimpressed by enemy counterfire, Corporal Ivan ‘Kit’ Best (2/3rd Battalion) noted a steely resolve in his men.

When I saw our chaps going up under fire it made me feel proud that I, too, was Australian. They just kept walking forward so calmly that they might [have] been going on manoeuvres – except that there was no feeling. To our right I saw a platoon advancing. The Italian gunners got their range, and as I watched I saw a shell burst right in the middle of the Australians. When the dust cleared away a couple were lying on the ground, but the others were going ahead without flinching. Another shell landed; a couple more fell. But the rest continued to advance at the same space. There was not the slightest sign of panic.[76]

Fortunately for the assailing army, Italy's shortage of raw materials and machine tools in the interwar period constrained the development of new arms. Consequently, much of Mussolini's front-line artillery dated back to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. Fewer guns left his arsenals in the period from 1939 to 1943 compared to 1915 to 1918. Scraping together an effective artillery force meant a miscellany of different models, with attendant issues of supply and repair. Even the quality of the projectiles was blighted. Australian troops were astounded how Italian 'shell fragmentation seemed poor and [that] many men blown off their feet got up again'.[77] Half the Italian shells were duds, Private John Collins (2/7th Field Regiment) observed.

We have to thank the Italians for having used very inferior ammunition in Libya. I am of opinion that fifty percent of their shells were duds. I saw one land on the nose-cap and turn over and over like a wheel for about 200 yards. Once a shell landed ten feet from three of us; we hit the earth before the shell, were covered with debris, but got up, and decided another locality would be more pleasant.[78]

Such shortcomings help to explain the 16th Brigade diarist's wariness in reporting a low number of casualties – there 'seemed less than there should be expected considering the width of the crossing and the intensity of the enemy's shelling.'[79]

A dearth of transport and ammunition exacerbated the enemy garrison's precarious position. 'The gunners where I was fought with all their might', an Italian artillery officer recounted. 'Our battery shot off 5,200 rounds in six hours but could not keep it up because the supplies of ammunition ran out. There was no transport to bring more ammunition forward, so we had

to surrender.'[80] Australian soldiers were also intrigued by their enemy's standard issue bolt-action Carcano *modello* 1891 rifle, which resembled a toy beside their larger Lee-Enfield .303 equivalent. Prone to jamming, the Italian Breda *modello* 30 light machine gun was totally unsuited for use in North African conditions. Thin-skinned Italian hand grenades also proved feeble in comparison to their more destructive British equivalent, known as the Mills Bomb.[81]

* * *

Australian troops continued their advanced across a plain towards the town while the British tanks felt their way forward, a situation Bergonzoli evaluated mid-afternoon as: 'very critical'. On the other side, Lieutenant Colonel Roy Jerram (7th Royal Tank Regiment) congratulated Mackay: '16th Brigade is bloody marvellous.'[82]

Private William Nagle (2/1st Battalion), by this time, felt 'very hungry'.

We had lived on cigarettes for the best part of a day. When seeking shelter to lunch on bully-beef we were opened on by heavy machine-gun fire. I jumped smartly into a ditch and stopped there for three quarters of an hour. I could feel brother death breathing on my neck and it was too hot for my liking. Our tanks wiped out the gunners and we went forward and took over their position … am now on the look-out for a good pair of field-glasses. During the afternoon my leg got very sore and stiff, so I reported to the medical officers, who packed me off to hospital, where I am at present.[83]

Lieutenant Swinton, whom we saw breaching the perimeter defences, was wandering back to HQ, 'well behind the forward troops, when a stray bullet whipped along looking for something to hit and picked me – drilled a hole through my left hand; but I'll be back on the job again in a fortnight or three weeks.'[84]

His leg badly shattered by an enemy bullet, 25-year-old Private Robert Lamerton, a northern Sydney drinks waiter, was rushed to an aid post where the limb was amputated.

I got my issue during the main attack. We were all keyed up when we got the order to go, and I hadn't gone far when the Iti's got me. My leg was so

far gone that it had to come off – and it did, in a tent not far behind the lines.[85]

‘The Italians were dealt with in no uncertain fashion’

Reports of enemy treachery – initially barred by Cairo military censors – loomed ‘quite large in the mind of every soldier’. In time they reached readers back home. Sergeant Bernard Carson shared several instances of enemy perfidy, stressing the ‘penalty paid was just and at times savagely grim.’[86] Private John Fraser (2/11th Battalion) passed on details of an incident to his mother.

On one occasion one part of a company saw the Italians flying white flags so they went to take prisoners. When they were about 20 or 30 yards off, the Italians opened up with a machine-gun and killed two and wounded three … The rest went down to cover and waited until they could get out. Later, when the post fell, the Italians were dealt with in no uncertain fashion.[87]

A grenade thrown from within a mob of prisoners, on another occasion, killed an Australian officer. A further duplicitous act involved Captain Ian Green (2/7th Battalion), whose company had just taken Post 22 and were rounding up prisoners. As Green looked on with his second in command, Lieutenant Charles Macfarlane, an Italian soldier rose from a pit, shouldered his rifle and shot Green clean through the chest. Dropping his rifle, hands in the air, the soldier climbed from the position, grinning broadly. Incensed, an Australian soldier pushed him back into the pit, emptying a Bren gun magazine into him. Other nearby troops demanded they be allowed to bayonet the other prisoners before Macfarlane intervened, barring any further revenge killing.[88]

Flags in Green’s hometown of Morwell were later flown at half-mast to honour his memory – the first resident of his shire to enlist. The local ‘council stood in silence for two minutes and passed a vote of sympathy to be sent to his parents.’[89]

‘Every little fold in the ground gave up a few Italians’

A message intercepted in the afternoon told of Bergonzoli's calamity: 'situation at Bardia very grave. Extreme pressure in centre from British. Consider necessary to destroy ciphers. Request intervention from Tobruk.' Hours later the Italian commander cabled: 'Tonight I will try and close in around Bardia. If you can, send aircraft from dawn onwards.'[90] As it eventuated no aircraft would arrive, the fortress' fate sealed. Back in Australia, Menzies announced that AIF troops had 'broken through part of the defences' for 'very slight losses' and taken 8,000 prisoners.[91]

'As you know, there were thousands of prisoners', 'Bunny' McWilliams professed.

… they were taken, they were disarmed and pushed back through our oncoming units and I, myself, believe, more of them were killed by their own batteries than by our army, navy and air-force combined, and the number of shells I, myself, saw land amongst them convinced me it was done deliberately.[92]

Sergeant Colin Warrington (Royal Australian Engineers) laid signals wire throughout the day to help direct artillery fire. Following one barrage, he watched 'one of the most amazing things I have ever seen' happen.

Every little fold in the ground gave up a few Italians and they all rushed into a mob like so many cattle, waving white flags the while, until we had nearly a thousand prisoners there and we didn't know what to do with them.[93]

Australian 6th Division during the capture of Bardia, 6 January 1941. In a letter home after the battle, Private Victor Maltman wrote: 'I went through the three days of fighting without a scratch and pray God I'll go through this next action the same. I am pleased to have got back in time for the first action and feel proud to belong to the AIF.'(Argus Newspaper Collection of photographs, State Library of Victoria)

'The vast number of prisoners taken may seem to be fictitious', Lance Sergeant Edgar Weaver (2/1st Field Company) shared, 'but it is correct'.

As a fighting force, the Italians we have encountered so far, are of poor calibre. The posts that held out, shelling us continually until silenced the following day, earned the respect of our chaps. To give you some idea of the stamina of the general type of Itie soldier, they were coming out in masses and were being rounded up and put to work completing some of our tasks not long after we broke through. Our job changed from that of feverish workers to that of overseers, directing conscripted labour. But they were an inoffensive, unhappy type, and the general feeling was more of pity for them than hostility … It was rather ridiculous to see how casually the prisoners were handled. As the day lengthened, they were coming in from all points of the compass, hastily marshalled into groups and set off in the general direction of 'back behind'.[94]

'Then I did not know what had hit me'

Night fell on Bardia. Sporadic fighting continued through the hours of darkness. Keith Pattemore (2/2nd Battalion) met up with 'mates in the dark

and learned of our casualties, which though light, included some of our best men and mates since [leaving] Ingleburn.'

Words of sympathy for bereaved brothers – swapping of experiences for those who cared to talk. Officers' performances [were] discussed – a few cursed and many exalted – what the officers said of their men – what the boys thought about the English tank men – what the tank boys said about the Aussies – all talked over and repeated for newcomers' benefit.[95]

From his dugout, Gunner Norman Denham (2/2 Field Regiment), a Sale (Vic.) laundryman, took a moment to pen a note to his mother.

We have driven the Italians back until their back is to wall and they had to make a stand … Tons and tons of shells have been sent over … Of course, the enemy is doing his bit, too, but his shells are inferior to ours and don't worry us much … I have just received orders to cart ammunition up all night and it looks like a final push. I hope it is as I want a wash and a shave.[96]

Infantrymen, on guard for a possible counterattack, were ordered not to rest, but to remain vigilant. Together with Don Peirce, a friend from Coffs Harbour, Sergeant Gordon Blanchard ventured into enemy territory. Reconnoitring a crossroad and block house, the pair were suddenly challenged by an Italian sentry.

We jumped down behind a bank, got our hand grenades ready and waited for a fight and then we started to crawl back. The enemy opened fire upon us with a number of machine guns. We got up and raced about 50 yards until we came to a heap of stones, which provided good cover for us while we got our breath back and made up our minds what to do. We decided to separate and make for home individually. We shook hands, and then made a break together and raced like blazes. The faster I ran the faster and thicker the bullets seemed to come, but I reached Company HQ without a scratch, but ready to drop with exhaustion. We both got back O.K. with the information. We then went on another big patrol and set fire to an ammunition truck.[97]

Private Stanley Enks (2/7th Battalion), a Mackay dam sinker, and his mate were manning a trench mortar, but 'left that to charge forward with fixed bayonets ... Scared – I'll say we were, but we just dashed on while bullets

whistled round'. Enks was hit in the arm when a 'machine gun opened fire on me at 30 yards range'.

It just felt like an electric shock. My rifle butt was smashed, and I went straight over ... My mate was not so lucky. He kept going and was killed. [Private] Pat Kerby, he was, [a station hand] from Blackall. We were the only Queenslanders in the detachment and had stuck together since our transfer there. This was at 2 a.m. on January 4. I can't forget the date because it was my birthday. 'What a present', I said when I woke up.[98]

Circumspect in his writing, Private William Chapman (2/7th Field Ambulance), too, had survived his 'first test',

... and believe me I do not want to go through that night again, for a while. We were kept going all night attending to the injured. It was a sorry sight to see some of our lads that were being brought in. Most of them were very young, but they never complained.[99]

'Any one of this mob could have quite easily escaped'

The Australian 16th Brigade advanced on the second morning of the assault, 4 January, with the objective of cutting the enemy defences in half and occupying the town and port. Enemy forces, however, continued to hold out strongly in Bardia's southern sector where Bergonzoli's artillery was still active. Gordon Blanchard, Donald Peirce plus other troops from their company, ably supported by three Matilda tanks, attacked the position where they had earlier had their 'little bit of fun.' 'The enemy sent over everything they had at us', Peirce relived 'and we were pinned down for an hour.'

It is a miracle how we came through it. One fellow received a broken leg. We cleaned up the position and rounded up about 1000 prisoners. Well, I could go on writing for hours of the many brave deeds that were done here. One chap attacked one post with one grenade and captured 300 prisoners single-handed … Our Battalion made a great name for itself and now it is known as the 'mad 2nd Battalion'.[100]

Four Dubbo friends – Sergeant Luke McGuinn, Corporal Brian 'Spud' Stevens, Lance Corporal Vivian Dawson and Private Bruce Kerdavid – from No. 14 Platoon, 2/3rd Battalion, were amongst the first troops to enter

Bardia late in the afternoon. In a memorable charge, calling out to each other to remain in contact, their entry into the town coincided with the anniversary of their farewell march in Sydney. At one point in the fighting, a 'dud' shell landed between Dawson and McGuinn, a twist of fate Harold Rae hailed as 'one of the wonders of the war'.[101]

Lieutenant Thomas Mills (6th Cavalry Regiment) led three troops of Bren Gun Carriers to reconnoitre the town. He displayed 'great courage', a citation to his later Military Cross read, 'in organising attacks against isolated strong posts which might have delayed the capitulation ... This officer showed great coolness throughout the battle and was an inspiration to his men.' In a subsequent skirmish, accompanied by Sergeant Vincent McQuillan ('A' Squadron, 6th Cavalry Regiment), Mills attacked a post 'which we thought had a few men in it and when we got to it eventually took 60 prisoners besides a number of dead and wounded, but this was just a typical occurrence in this amazing show.'[102]

Later writing to McQuillan's mother, Major Denzil Macarthur-Onslow gave an account of her son's gallantry (following his death, which we will learn of, later in the month).

He was without doubt an outstanding leader of men, and it has given us all the greatest pleasure to hear in this week's orders that His Majesty has seen fit to bestow the DCM as an award for his brilliant action in capturing an Italian strongpoint single handed.[103]

* * *

Len Ridgewell revelled in his company's role in the taking of 'Bardia town'. Booty followed.

The enemy put up a little scrap, but only with machine guns. Talk about loot – Ned Kelly had nothing on we Aussies. … After the battle I and three others from my section were detailed to take 400 or more prisoners about six miles. We searched them before starting. Didn't we get some loot: a gold watch, which the officer got down on. But we managed to smuggle four automatics back to our mates.[104]

Brigadier Arthur Allen (16th Brigade) was already managing a large influx of prisoners when a new body of Italians appeared, also wishing to

surrender. More of an imposition than anything, Allen replied 'that it was too late and to come back next morning.' The enemy troops retired appropriately, returning the next day.[105]

Not every Italian, however, was so keen to concede defeat. A lance corporal in 2/4th Battalion received two broken ribs in a fight that broke out with a group of enemy soldiers refusing to give in.[106]

'The first day the prisoners were bad enough, but [on] the second day I saw some amazing sights', an officer called to mind.

I was coming home at dusk. The battle was still on, and I was marching down the Capuzzo Road when I saw a mile of prisoners, guarded by one Australian in front, one in the rear, one in the centre, and two on a truck. Any one of this mob could have quite easily escaped without being seen or could have hit the guard on the head.[107]

'Harold Brockley's name will be on our lips as one of our first heroes'

Supported by the six Matilda tanks still running, 19th Brigade troops began mopping up the last pockets of enemy resistance. Private Harold Brockley, a driver and mechanic (2/6th Battalion) whose truck had broken down, joined in the fighting because 'he felt like a bludger sitting at battalion headquarters and wanted to be in it.'[108] Brockley joined 'D' Company in the bloody fighting for Post 11, an engagement Lance Corporal Alexander James Llewellyn called 'hell on earth'.[109] Brockley's CO, Captain Max Little, a 'tall, well-built man' with a 'crisp military cast of features, a clipped moustache, and a voice to go with them' recounted the bloody engagement – the single deadliest day of the war for 2/6th Battalion – in a letter to Brockley's wife.[110]

Picture the most desolate, forsaken spots on earth with harsh, rocky gullies and with fortresses of concrete and wire on which the Italians had worked for four years. These fortresses had dozens of guns and hundreds of men, mortars, machine guns of all types, and concrete tank traps, seven feet deep and 14 feet wide. Picture a handful of men, one your husband, attacking – in the half light of the morning. There were three forts [Posts], 100, 400 and 500 yards away. In spite of perfectly murderous fire which killed some of

the party, your husband, then Henry Sergeant Gullett [son of the late Sir Henry Gullett, killed in an air crash at Canberra], and one or two others, reached a bit of dead ground close up to a fort. Frightened of the bayonets of the Australians, the Italians came out to surrender, but when they saw that there were only four or five Australians, 50 or 60 of the enemy rushed back to the fort and machine-gunning began. Your husband shammed dead for a couple of hours. The whole ground was a pulp, every inch being marked with machine gun bullets or shrapnel. Bullets went under him and through his packs and clothes but strangely enough, he of them all, was only slightly wounded. His hands were a little torn when he had cut and pulled wire away. Gullett had a bullet through one side of his cheek, knocking out a tooth or two and then emerging out the other cheek. Gullett, your husband and the others saw they could do no more as they were too few and decided to withdraw. A Queenslander [Harold 'Bernie' Damm] carried his [mortally] wounded brother [Claude Damm] on his back. Everything the Italians had was poured at them, but by a miracle they climbed the steep *wadi* banks and got away. When the fort was at last captured, 35 officers and 372 men were taken prisoner. Only four of your husband's party returned. The rest were killed or captured, to be released by us later on. When we are old men, we will tell the tale of Post 11, and Harold Brockley's name will be on our lips as one of our first heroes. He was one of the gamest of men.[111]

Post 11, which defended a strategically unimportant section of Wadi el Mustered, eventually fell for the loss of 38 Australians dead or missing. Another 26 men lay wounded. The heroic struggle to silence the position, one of the last enemy posts to capitulate, is depicted in Ivor Hele's celebrated painting hanging today in the Australian War Memorial.[112] Hailed as 'one of the first heroes of the 2nd AIF', Brockley's bravery was not officially recognised, since 'all his officers were killed or wounded and as no one was left to report his heroism officially he missed a decoration', Little informed his wife. In a tragic turn of events, Brockley died on 28 March 1941 while absent without leave (AWL) in Egypt. Brockley, at the time, was in a party of soldiers who had broken camp and were visiting a roadhouse on the Cairo– Alexandria Road. Shot by an Egyptian national, the subsequent court of enquiry established Brockley was killed 'under provocation' in self-defence.[113]

* * *

Bardia capitulated at 1 p.m. on 5 January 1941, 56 hours after fighting began. Sergeant Ian Fitchett was quick to tag the feat, 'one of the strongest fortified positions ever tackled in modern warfare … one of the greatest of Australia's military achievements.'[114]

CHAPTER SIX

‘No. I’ll not forget Bardia’

News of Bardia’s shock fall reverberated around the globe. American newspapers applauded the victory. The *New York Times* viewed it as a harbinger of the ‘noble’ Allied cause, the *Washington Times Herald* labelled Mackay’s troops ‘world’s finest’.[1] Suitably impressed members of New York’s ‘Anzac Society’ cabled $20,000 (£6,260) to Canberra and Wellington to construct hostels for the use of soldiers based in the Middle East.[2] On top of the Italian rout, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt signalled his intent that America would become the ‘arsenal of the democracies’ in providing arms to those nations fighting Axis aggression.

Across the Atlantic, King George VI commended ‘the gallant manner [in] which Australian troops have borne themselves on their first entry into the African theatre of war.’ Churchill likewise sent his ‘heartiest congratulations’. Drawing inspiration from the British prime minister’s famous Battle of Britain speech, Anthony Eden quipped: ‘Never before has so much been surrendered by so many to so few.’ Warm tributes filled London newspapers; *The Daily Express* celebrated the Australians as ‘the cream of the Empire troops and the finest, toughest men in the world.’ Egypt’s King Farouk also congratulated Wavell on clearing the Italian threat, while Cairo was said to have ‘seethed with excitement’.[3]

Mussolini oppositely turned on his countrymen, vilifying them as a ‘race of sheep’. He likened the blow to a load of washing needing ‘at least a week’ of drying time before his people could come to terms with it. His Fascist propaganda machine shifted into gear, inflating the number of enemy troops Bergonzoli had faced and decrying Bardia’s importance as ‘only a coastal town’. Moreover, the British had erred, a propaganda

broadcast blurted, since the British advance had over-extended their lines of communication. Australian troops, it was also claimed, were barbaric, particularly in their habit of lashing prisoners to the front of tanks! Berlin's *Völkischer Beobachter* joined in, rehashing the lie: 'We must not forget Bardia was defended by a handful of Italians against an overwhelming British force, comprising 800 tanks and 400,000 men [*sic*]. Everybody knows Bardia was never of vital importance.'[4]

Closer to our story, Private John O'Malley (2/11th Battalion) believed Bardia's capitulation spelt the beginning of the end for Italy, eventually putting 'Italy out of the war and Mussolini back where he belongs in the gutter.'[5]

'Today a new place, situated in a far-distant land, becomes indissolubly linked with Australian history', Rockhampton's *Evening News* touted, 'taking its place with Gallipoli and Villers-Bretonneux and other distant parts where our men at arms have won glory and honour for their country.'[6] Flags were to be flown across the country in celebration, on Menzies' request.[7] 'Australia's sons have once again played their part', he declared, in what 'may be regarded as the turning point in the war.' Amid such acclaim, the prime minister sent 'three cheers' to Thomas Blamey (AIF commander in the Middle East) for a 'superb victory' while his Army Minister, Percy Spender, drew a parallel to the 'heroes of Dunkirk'.[8]

Cabling his congratulations, New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser described the Anzac spirit as 'imperishable'.[9] (Bardia would also feature in his country's endeavours when New Zealand forces recaptured it in November 1941.)

* * *

Unscathed from the fighting, Sergeant Gordon Blanchard watched enemy troops file into captivity.

We are resting to-day after a glorious victory. From where I am sitting, near an 'Itie' dug out, two machine guns and a field gun, I can see thousands of prisoners being marched, back. They are just like sheep and appear to be very happy to be out of the war.[10]

Private Frank Donnelly (2/2nd Battalion), a Coffs Harbour labourer, was seen escorting a 'mob' of prisoners, grinning broadly and seemingly oblivious to his wound, a bullet having passed through his hand.[11] The sheer number of prisoners 'amazed everyone, and our quartermasters' side had a most difficult job to feed them', an officer noted.[12]

Most of the prisoners seemed happy for the fighting to have ended. A 24-year-old infantryman, formerly a waiter in Rome, explained his countrymen's predicament to John Hetherington: 'I did not want to fight, but had no choice. None of the men you see here have had enough to eat in the last fortnight.'[13] In a chance brush, Corporal Ivan Best spoke with several Italo-Americans and an Italian immigrant from Western Australia whose homeland holidays were interrupted by the war and conscription. Best also noted several downhearted officers, some in tears. Others spoke highly of Mussolini. Foreseeing an Axis victory, they were incredulous when made aware of the Italian rout in Greece and Albania.[14] Ian Fitchett spoke with another expatriate from Bridgeport, Connecticut, forced into the army during a visit to Italy in August 1939. Cursing his bad luck in a broad American accent, he responded: 'What have I done? What have we all done to earn this misery?'[15]

Private Jim Gowen was 'much amused' by a red-headed prisoner sporting the same accent: 'God's people', he said, 'I am glad to see you guys!' One thousand of his compatriots had died at Bardia; another 3,000 were wounded.[16] In this latest whitewash, some 36,000 Italians were captured. The 'resistance of our troops was brief ', Count Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and Italian foreign minister, privately noted.[17]

'The sights were appalling'

A group of Australian soldiers sat in a *wadi* dissecting the battle and trading anecdotes. Reginald Glennie, another correspondent, looked on. 'There are poignant touches when some tell of mates that were killed but on the whole the men are happy and proud that they have survived the test.'[18]

Athrill with their first conquest, Sergeant Raymond Foster (2/3rd Battalion) and his fellow Diggers were 'getting quite cocky' and 'game enough to have a go at anybody'. Still, this was war and Foster's men had 'struck it tough' – two were wounded before the attack, one losing a leg just

below the knee. During the battle a further two were killed and three wounded.[19] Overall, 130 Australians had died in the fighting for Bardia; a further 326 were wounded.

The end of the fighting offered a respite, a moment to take stock, time to grieve. Officers and mates expressed their condolences to the families and friends of those killed. 'Despite the fact that the battle is over, it is a very sad day for me', Sergeant Gordon Blanchard (2/2nd Battalion) wrote pensively.

I have just learned that my very good friends, [Corporal] Herb McLeod, [Privates] Herb Barber and Sam Crossley are dead. The last time I saw them was just after we broke through the wire. Herb McLeod yelled out 'Good luck' to me and then set off with his section in another direction to do a job. His section included the abovementioned boys as well as Bill Hill and a couple of other boys from Macksville … Before I could complete this letter yesterday, Harold de Looze brought along the bodies of Herb Barber and Sam Crossley. We then conveyed them to our small cemetery, and at sunset yesterday Jack Reedy (Bonville) and I buried Herb Barber.[20]

Private George Young (2/2nd Battalion), a diesel mechanic and driver from Coffs Harbour, likewise mourned their deaths.

You remember Sam Crossley ... also Herb McLeod of Bonville, who died bravely and my best cobber of all, big Herb Barber ... and some more chaps you wouldn't know. Barber was a Dorrigo chap and worked around Ulong and played football with Dorrigo and as fine a chap as I ever knew and a good sport too.[21]

* * *

'I am proud to have known him', Private John Matthews lamented in a note to Private Robert 'Bob' Meader's (2/1st Battalion) parents in Wentworthville (NSW); he 'died like a Dinkum Aussie'. Serving in the same section, Matthews was there 'when the end came, and I thought it was my duty to let you know he wasn't alone. I want you to know that it was very quick, and Bob wasn't in any pain. He was laughing and joking right till the end.' More judicious in his condolences, Meader's company commander, Captain William Travers, had faith that he had 'made the

supreme sacrifice in the worthy cause that we may all be free, and I respect him for doing it.'[22]

Described as an 'enthusiastic and efficient militia soldier' who received his commission shortly before the war broke out, Lieutenant Peter Jackson-Taylor (2/3rd Battalion) of Sydney died during the first day's fighting, inauspiciously becoming the first officer casualty. An official telegram advising of death reached his mother on 12 January. Though cruel mischance, Jackson-Taylor's image appeared in a newspaper and newsreel nine days later. Clutching a copy of the paper, a neighbour rushed in, pointing to a group of Australian soldiers (supposedly) celebrating Bardia's capture. 'There was my son, in a tin hat, smiling broadly, and smoking a cheroot', his grieving mother exclaimed.

My heart leapt with joy, and I hurried to the telephone to ring the military authorities. They insisted it was correct that my son had been killed at Bardia … Now I have been told by the military authorities that the pictures I have seen showing my son alive were probably taken before Bardia and released as authentic Bardia pictures … I believed my son was still alive but now I have seen letters written by some of his AIF friends to mutual friends here. All of these letters refer to Peter's death in action.[23]

In tribute to her son, and as a fundraiser for his battalion, Jackson-Taylor's mother designed a so-called 'memory shirt'. Resembling an iconic Hawaiian shirt, the top featured 'an outline of North Africa, palm trees, aeroplanes, shell-bursts, tanks, Australian soldiers, mosques, villages, a view of the Mediterranean, and the place names of Bardia, Tobruk, Libya and Derna.' US retailers reportedly approved of the peculiarly patterned shirt, with signs (in the months preceding Pearl Harbor) it would become all 'the rage of America, with the growing hero-worship of the AIF'.[24]

A mother's tribute. Mrs F. McCay displays her 'AIF Memory Shirt', a colourful top depicting battles in North Africa, produced in honour of her deceased son, Lieutenant Peter Jackson-Taylor. McCay dedicated the shirt, finished in brown, green, red, blue and silver to 'to all wives, mothers, daughters and sweethearts of men in the AIF.' ('Keep the Home Fires Burning', *The Sun* (Sydney) 6 April 1941, p. 27

Back in Bardia, 24-year-old Ormond Tulloch (2/2nd Field Regiment) mourned the loss of 'one of our best and favourite officers', Lieutenant Claude 'Bob' Nethercote (2/2nd Battalion), who was killed on 3 January. Tulloch later died during the fighting in Greece on 23 April 1941.[25]

* * *

On the 'night it finished', Private Clyden 'Cliff ' Saltmarsh and mates camped 'where the dagoes had made a bit of a stand.' It had been tough, he related in a letter to friends in Cobram (Vic.), 'practically no sleep and marching all night.' Now with the chance to finally rest,

I put my blankets down near a bit of shelter when I drew them off the platoon truck. There were a few dead Italians lying about. There was supposed to be another chap sleeping in the same place, anyway I rambled

off, it was well dark when I got back to what I thought was my blankets; the other chap was well asleep, rolled up in his blankets. I lay down alongside him and scratched and cursed the fleas and lice all night and smoked cigarettes; the other fellow slept real well, never moved all night. In the morning I pulled the blankets off to wake him up, and instead of an Aussie it was a dead dagoe.[26]

* * *

'Here I am still kicking after the battle that was very cruel, and hell', Private Allan Naismith (2/7th Battalion) reassured his mother, whose three sons in uniform were serving overseas (a fourth was discharged as medically unfit).

… but only for a few scratches on my hands from shell splinters, I have come through somehow. I did not seem to worry as I seemed to know I would be all right. I met Bobby Cooling [2/5th Battalion] about three times in the advance. Only the two of us from Gunny [Gunbower, Vic.] were in it. I am sorry to say, yet in a way I am glad for I was in charge of stretcher bearers. I do not know when I can post this as we're still on the battlefield burying dead and cleaning out nests. We have a great compound of prisoners here. What a victory it has been. ... Eleven men of my platoon took over 2000 prisoners. My best friend was wounded five times as they surrendered, and I had to stay with him for 30 hours before we could get out. I had five wounded men and about a dozen wounded Italians to look after. All I can say is that we had a wonderful success and are looking forward to further successes.[27]

Private Joseph Jarret (2/6th Battalion) shared his involvement in the fighting with workmates at the Bowen (Qld) freezing works.

I was right in the taking of Bardia and was not sorry to see it taken, as I was about knocked out with fatigue, and the old nerves were not at their best by the end of it. I was over a month without a wash and never even had my boots off for over two weeks and of course no shave, so one was filthy … Well, I must say Bardia was last war's Gallipoli, as the fortifications were well supplied with machine guns and anti-tank guns very similar to the Siegfried Line in places, and the most of them were taken by grenade and

bayonet. I helped to take a couple of these posts, so I had a bird's eye view. The sights were appalling, and as a matter of fact before I went up to Bardia I was more afraid of seeing sights of men torn to pieces than of the actual battle, but after seeing them I was quite unconcerned ... One thing that was a great factor in our favour was that the Italians had no heart, as a lot of the poor devils were conscripts and they had [zealous fascist] Blackshirts amongst them to give them morale. How I hate those Blackshirts.[28]

Laid up in the 2/5th Australian General Hospital with shrapnel wounds to both legs, Lieutenant Harry Bamford (2/3rd Battalion) consoled his family with the news he was being well cared for. He hoped to return to action soon.

It was a great thrill going into action with our men. They are really wonderful soldiers, and, although they have a reputation for bad discipline, their battle discipline was remarkable. Our battalion was in at the start of Bardia and fought for three days. My boys were advancing up a slope when machine guns let fire at us. I ordered a charge. They went in yelling ('No lika da Dago, Musso') at the top of their voices. The Aussies swear they will do the most frightful things to the prisoners when they capture them; instead, they give them their valuable water and cigarettes, and with the wounded enemy they are as gentle as women. On the second day of the battle our men were armed to the teeth, with captured pistols and automatics. They are funny chaps. With death, all around them they laugh and joke about the queerest things one could imagine.[29]

Injured in the fighting, only hours later Corporal Albert Philp (2/17th Battalion) donated 'two pints of blood to one of his "cobbers"', saving his life. From his hospital bed, Philp allayed his parents' fears, writing that his injuries 'were nothing to worry about … I still have the little boomerang you gave me for a lucky charm … it has stuck to me, so far, thank God.'[30]

Hospitalised 'with a slight wound in the thigh', Private Bryne Bensley (2/3rd Battalion), a sawmill labourer from Gilgandra (NSW) shared news of his 'lucky break', since the 'bullet passed through the flesh, missing the bone ... This afternoon some English women brought along stacks of cakes, which we enjoyed very much, as we very seldom get cakes, only when on leave, which is once in a blue moon'.[31]

Months later, Private Richard 'Dick' Cooper (2/2nd Battalion) attended a welcome home reception in Uralla (NSW) with the unfortunate distinction of being the town's first war casualty. During a night patrol, Cooper had trodden on an Italian 'thermos bomb', so-called because of its resemblance to a thermos flask, which blew off his left heel, fracturing his foot and ankle. His leg was later amputated below the knee in Alexandria. Cooper's speech was answered by the local audience with a rousing rendition of 'He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. On a sadder note, Cooper related news from a fellow amputee – Bert 'Dan' Fuller, another local boy and one of the first in the region to enlist, was the 'unluckiest of men to meet his end ... resting in a slit trench [during the fighting at Tobruk on 21 January] when he was struck on the helmet with a stray tank shell. He lived 2½ hours.'[32]

'They would have wiped us out if they had had the guts to fight us'

Back on the battleground, troops dug slit trenches for protection against possible retaliatory air strikes. Digging-in was essential in the open desert expanse, as an Australian Army training bulletin directed: 'Even a shallow trench is better than nothing. Unwilling troops will quickly become keen to dig after their first raid.'[33]

Abundant spoils and appropriated rations were savoured and shared.[34] Entering the Italian headquarters, Captain Patrick Shanahan's (2/11th Battalion) 'B' Company happened upon the officers' mess, discovering how they live 'like Kings while their troops starve. We had wine and cognac with our hard biscuits and tinned meat.'[35]

A bushranger motif appeared on the main street, formerly 'Via Benito Mussolini', now renamed 'Ned Kelly'. Revelling in the occasion, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Chilton, a partner in a Sydney law firm, became the temporary 'governor of Bardia'.[36] In another jaunty deed, Lance Corporal George Caling (2/2nd Battalion) seized the opportunity to ride through the streets of Bardia on a grey horse, once an Italian admiral's steed.[37]

Turning a deaf ear to Mackay's directive, Diggers again combed the battlefield in search of enemy weapons, equipment or accoutrements to salvage or to send home. Scouring ravines and dugouts, Private Charles

Freeman (2/8th Battalion), a Mullumbimby (NSW) bank clerk, ‘collected a few souvenirs’,

which we may be lucky enough to take back to Aussie with us. One very sad sight was a dug-out I went into, which had evidently been used as a PO. There were hundreds of undelivered letters there. I tore off a number of stamps and collected a few cards, which I shall post later to you. … I brought back an Italian rifle, bayonet, tank shell, anti-tank shell, ammunition, badges, buttons, stamps and the top of a thermos bomb. All these souvenirs will be interesting if I can hang on to them until after the war.[38]

Diggers enjoy an appropriated cigar after the fall of Bardia. (Argus Newspaper Collection of photographs, State Library of Victoria)

The 708 enemy vehicles, not counting motorcycles, that fell into the division’s hands were especially prized. ‘Nothing surprises us now as to [the] extent ... of captured war equipment’, Lance Sergeant Edgar Weaver communicated. ‘In one gully along the road were more vehicles than you would find at Gilgandra Show [NSW], and it was the same in every gully about the place.’[39] Misappropriated vehicles were driven until their fuel

tanks ran dry.[40] 'The boys had the time of their lives', gushed Roy Sherwood, a 31-year-old driver from Sydney.

They were riding motorbikes, driving lorries, tanks, and all kinds of things the Dagoes had. There were a lot who couldn't ride or drive until now, and they'd give anything a go. There were many Dago planes down, and a few chaps got the engine of one going; and I thought that at any moment they'd make the damn thing go up with only one wing. Laugh! We did have some fun watching the stunts and antics of some of the chaps. The boys all had pistols or revolvers on them and were shooting at anything. I thought they'd be shooting some of our own chaps, but they can handle anything now safely ... I just made up a saying and we all use it now – 'What comes down must blow up.' As good as Confucius, eh?[41]

'Frightfully dirty' and longing for a bath in the sea, Ormond Tulloch treasured his trophy haul.

I'm finding the new Dago boots I'm wearing very comfortable. I have a revolver, ammunition belt and bayonet, which I'm going to try and keep as souvenirs of Bardia, but I suppose I'll have to dump them later … Captain McPherson has his ceremonial sword hanging on the side of his truck. Some of the chaps are having a great time charging over the country in Fiat cars and [much to Mackay's annoyance] shooting off captured revolvers, automatics, etc.[42]

Handling enemy weaponry, however, was fraught with danger. Private Arnold Weir (2/5th Battalion) was engaged as a reserve stretcher bearer when a group of Royal Artillerymen fired a 'fixed' Italian artillery piece. Carnage ensued in what Weir labelled his 'initiation to war'.

It was a terrible affair – the breech was blown out, and [when] we arrived on the scene (almost immediately), as we were in a wadi not 100 yards away, we saw the results of a devilish piece of work. It claimed the four lives too.[43]

Twenty-year-old Sapper Norman Armstrong, whom we met after Sidi Barrani's capitulation, was attempting to repair an Italian revolver when it accidentally discharged. Shot through the head, Armstrong later died at a British military hospital in Alexandria. His death, the *Sydney Morning Herald* disingenuously reported, was due to his truck running over an

Italian booby trap.[44] Disturbed by a rising 'picnic spirit', Mackay forewarned of 'civilianism' within the division, citing the 'promiscuous firing of rifles and exploding of bombs', dressing in Italian clothing 'like clowns', fraternising with prisoners, keeping dogs and 'looking after dogs instead of men.'[45]

Bardia post capitulation; another retitling of the Via Benito Mussolini. (Argus Newspaper Collection of photographs, State Library of Victoria)

* * *

While the Australians revelled in their triumph, General Annibale Bergonzoli, three divisional commanders, and an ad hoc mix of Italian troops fled east towards Tobruk. Trucks and Bren Gun Carriers were dispatched to intercept the motley enemy tide. Private John 'Jack' Hansen (Army Service Corps) shared an amusing encounter with a party of vanquished stragglers.

… we were up past Bardia delivering supplies, when one of our planes flew just over our heads and dropped a message saying: 'Italians on beach – I'll direct.' Our officer said we had better go and see who they were. So we went, two officers and six drivers. We stopped about half a mile from the

first ones we saw and fired on them. They didn't fire back, and we advanced up close and fired again. Three put up their hands and came up to us. Then, what we thought to be a big group of Italians turned out to be a flock of Bedouin goats. We could not see them too well as there were small bushes on the ground there. The captain said we had better have a look along the beach. I said I would go and ran off to the beach, which I thought to be about half a mile away, but the land was deceiving, and it turned out to be about a mile and a half. When I got close, I could see dozens of Italians and I fired on them. Some put up their hands and others ran away along the coast and tried to beat me, but I ran after them and cut them off. After I fired a few more shots over their heads and ran about a bit, I rounded up 150 of them, counting six officers. I marched them back about a mile and found the officers and other boys, who had gathered 50 more. They all laughed when they saw me with so many. Funny, it was the best day's fun we had, especially for us Army Service Corps boys, for that's not our work at all.[46]

Just on dark, Charles Freeman went out with a 36-man fighting patrol, bagging 'between 2000 and 3000 prisoners'.

They would have wiped us out if they had had the guts to fight us. We came back from that patrol with half a dozen revolvers and plenty of decent cognac; threw the revolvers away. I'm looking for a decent automatic, and the first chap I see with a wristwatch is going to lose it. Another thing I want is clean socks and a clean towel; and there is a shortage of matches. Lucky I've got sufficient tobacco to last for a while.[47]

* * *

Feelings of pride filled letters home. 'I think that we have more than held our own with Benito's little boy', Gunner Earl Pickering posted.[48]

'We have had our first smack at the Dagoes, and, incidentally, they had a pretty good smack at us with everything but their mess tins and water bottles for about three days, before they gave in', Private Edward Le Souef (2/6th Battalion), a station overseer, relayed to his father.[49]

Belfast-born Private Victor Maltman (2/1st Machine Gun Battalion), too, felt 'proud to belong to the A.I.F. They were splendid. No fear, no

shouting, just quietly walked into the Italian machine gun fire (which was pretty awful) and took the place with the bayonet.'[50]

'Casualties were very small', Private Denis Atkinson comforted his parents. Having imagined it would be 'ten times more severe than it really was, all of the boys came through without a scratch.'

Anyway, there is no need to worry about me, as the chances of getting shot are about 500 to 1. During the last part of the stunt, I was back a mile or so directing prisoners back and 'fanning' them, which presented a good opportunity of souveniring automatics. I secured a Browning .25.20 and a Beretta .9 calibre. I have been amusing myself ever since stripping and mending automatics. After the boys got into the town of Bardia they turned on the poultry act. Everywhere one looked one could see a 'Digger' racing down the road after a speeding fowl, which were harder to round up than a hundred Italians. We had one in our platoon, but one of the drivers would not eat any of it as he reckoned it died of shell shock. We just about topped the poll for an average of prisoners. According to a Cairo newspaper the 16th brigade, with mechanised support, took 47,000 prisoners at Bardia – not bad for three days' work, especially as it was our first job.[51]

'Though we had a certain number of casualties we came though the better than I would have thought it possible', Lieutenant Charles Terrey penned in a note to his cousin in Ootha (NSW). The troops' sense of humour, he added, was a definite asset in combat.

The blighters are always cracking jokes and while they can do that there's no hope of us ever losing this war. The funniest sight I ever saw in my life was a husky Aussie coming through the barrage at Bardia with his trousers falling down. The barrage at the wire was a good one and we lost a few men, but not so many as we thought we should, going through ... Anyway, to get back to this particular Aussie, his pants were falling, and he kept saying, 'What'll I do?' Naturally the advice he was given is not for consumption amongst young ladies, so the poor blighter just had to stop in the middle of the barrage and take off his pants and finish the attack ... in his underpants … He indignantly denies the rumour that he killed a dago just because he had a new looking pair of pants on, but he's certainly got a new pair of Itie pants on now. So perhaps ...[52]

While soldiers crowed of their exploits, an Australian Army report was swift to downplay any notion of a 'walkover'.

The magnitude of the results achieved at such a trifling cost can mislead one in[to] supposing that the Battle of Bardia was a 'walkover'. It was in fact nothing of the sort. Generally speaking, the Italians fought well whilst their defences were intact, in some cases extremely well. However, they seemed unable to re-act quickly enough to developments, or to adapt their dispositions and actions to the changing situation. Once their positions had been penetrated and their defensive plan upset they became confused and hesitant, and quickly lost heart. Generally, they seemed quite incapable of dealing with an unexpected situation ... it must be remembered that their success could not have been won without the cooperation of the British gunners, machine gunners and tank crews who gave them such splendid support.[53]

* * *

'No. I'll not forget Bardia', Keith Pattemore recounted years later, '3 January '41, means the day the AIF fought its first pitched battle in this war. To the old 6th it means the day of the "great test", when they proved that the fighting ability of the nation had not deteriorated since Gallipoli.'[54]

* * *

The first battle casualties from Bardia arrived home to a 'tumultuous welcome' in mid-April 1941. From car windows, invalided troops waved crutches, fez caps and other trophies at public onlookers before imparting their stories to waiting journalists. Private Robert Stevenson's (2/1st Field Ambulance) left foot was severed by a flying shell splinter while carrying a stretcher case. Glossing over his own misfortune, he declared that 'it was a great show, and the boys did a great job'.[55]

Private Ernest Abe (2/7th Battalion), an Albury ledger keeper, was injured with a shrapnel wound on the left side of his face; his eye was later removed. Abe was discharged in June 1941.[56]

One of Len Ridgewell's mates from Manilla (NSW), Private Gordon Hatch (2/2nd Battalion), received 'a nasty hit'.[57] Ridgewell himself was

later wounded in the Greek campaign. Similarly incapacitated, he was discharged in 1942. Returning home to Manilla, he became licensee of the Post Office Hotel.[58]

'I was working an anti-tank gun', Private John Gatty (2/1st Battalion), a miner from Campbelltown (Tas.), recounted. 'I fired six shots when I found myself on the ground with a bullet in my thigh. That was the end of the show for me'. No mention was made of his dreadful head injuries. (Gatty was lauded in the post-war press for his work in completing a 1947 census of far north Queensland mission stations, 'forcing his way through tangled scrub and crocodile-infested rivers', a task made worse by his tracker deserting on the first day and a packhorse bolting.)[59]

Later in November 1941, an ode to 'Bert of Bardia' appeared in a Sydney paper.

Bert of Bardia, back in town
Bert of Bardia, big and brown
Dragging a leg with a shattered knee
Came to the bar and drank with me.

There was a mournful look on Bert.
He had the air of a man who's hurt.
And, glancing down at his blighted limb,
My heart was sorry indeed for him.

'STIFF luck!' I said. Then it seemed to me
That I had made a mistake, for he,
With his strong half-smile and his manly touch,
Declared, 'Aw, it isn't that so much!'

AND his gaze went through that city bar
Till it seemed to be fixed upon things afar,
And I knew that he saw the sand dunes rise
In Libya, under the scorching skies.

AND I knew that, in spite of the price of war,
He yearned to be back with his mates once more,
There with the cobbers he loved so well,
Fighting his way through a dusty Hell!

AND it cheered me to think there were other grim
And resolute sons of the soil like him –
The type who will see the battle through!
So, Bert of Bardia, here's to you!

– T. W. Nathan[60]

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tobruk – ‘the second leg of a winning double’

On the day Bardia fell, Churchill contemplated building up Wavell’s forces for a continued advance towards the Libyan capital of Tripoli. Tobruk had caught the prime minister’s eye. The benefits of securing the strategically positioned harbour were clear, for it had the potential to significantly ease the strain on the overworked vehicles sustaining O’Connor’s westward advance. But there was also the question of ranking theatre objectives, especially in the Balkans. On 8 January, Britain’s Middle East commanders in chief were advised that once Tobruk had fallen, all operations were secondary to supporting the Greeks. But with Athens arguing against British reinforcements as a possible pretext for Nazi invasion, Whitehall’s offer of assistance – for the moment – was declined. Changing course, Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff opted to continue *Compass*, a raid that had evolved into a full offensive, all the way to Benghazi.

Tobruk, in many respects a larger version of the Bardia fortress, was General Iven Mackay’s next objective, though as Albany’s *Advertiser* warned, ‘if the Italians were to resist stoutly anywhere it will be at Tobruk, which now claims prominence in the headlines.’[1] Far from a natural fortress, Mackay’s men would have to traverse large tracts of open land before reaching the outer defences – a 30-mile semi-circular defensive perimeter cut into the desert floor complete with barbed wire, minefields, an anti-tank ditch and 128 sequentially numbered defensive posts. Though well positioned, the Italian posts lacked the overhead protection of a pillbox, with only a small number of defenders able to fire their weapons, the remainder trapped below ground – as happened at Bardia – unable to fight.

Thirty-seven tanks dug-in as pillboxes, at the junction of the Bardia and El Adem roads – later known as 'King's Cross' – also presented a formidable obstacle, together with individual machine gun nests, minefields and aerial bombs buried in the ground and detonated by trip wires (what we call improvised explosive devices or IEDs, today). Tobruk's commander, 72-year-old General Petassi Manella, was entrusted with defending an area double the size of Bardia, but with just over half the men, a garrison of 25,000 troops. Labelled by Count Galeazzo Ciano as the 'king of the artillerymen', Manella possessed a considerable number of artillery pieces, including 232 heavy, medium and field guns, 48 heavy anti-aircraft guns and four large-calibre coastal defence guns. His artillery commander, General Umberto Barberis, was allegedly so confident his guns alone could repulse any attack that it was only after pressure from subordinate officers that plans were formulated for a counterattack, should enemy troops breach the perimeter.[2]

'He was to go into a nasty area'

Fresh from their 'blooding' at Bardia, Ian Fitchett noted 'startled jumps at explosions [from demolition work that] showed that no one was back to normal', though eyes were already 'cast westwards, and the men seemed keen for more.'[3] Wavell's victorious and newly renamed XIII Corps now pushed west toward Tobruk. Mussolini's coastal road was a 'good one', Private William Guyatt (2/5th Battalion), a Melbourne timber worker thought, just 'like the Princess Highway.'[4] Minimal resistance was met. Indeed, the entire undertaking was proceeding so smoothly that Mackay issued a warning against what he described as a 'picnic spirit' attitude: 'We all wish to capture Tobruk, but we shall never do it by slackness and complacency.' A stickler for protocol, Mackay prohibited wearing enemy clothing and trialling enemy ordnance. Yet the men's natural curiosity significantly boosted the division's firepower. Many troops also squeezed into Italian army boots simply because their own were worn out.

Mackay's victors, in Ian Fitchett's words, resembled:

ants streaming to and from an anthill and are piling up their forces around the zig-zag perimeter of Tobruk's defences with the same meticulous care. As guns, tanks and lorry-loads of stores roll up, patrols are systematically

sounding the defences in the same way as the Australian troops tested Bardia's teeth before their attack.[5]

As had happened at Bardia, Italian troops were reluctant to venture out into no-man's land. The rattle of machine gun fire from perimeter posts or the intermittent shriek of a shell signalled a rattled opponent.[6] Corporal Geoff Hall (2/4th Battalion) was outside the fortress when 'the dagoes opened fire on our forward platoon'. Ordered to 'dig-in', he 'needed no second telling.'

I found myself next to the company commander, and we shared the one hole. The only time we stopped was to 'flatten out' when a shell came over accompanied by the 'whe-e-e' that means 'close', which made us do the 'ironing-board' act, which means existence while those jagged pieces of metal buzzed about as though seeking a victim, or bullets from the cursed sobbing Breda [machine guns], which took on a sterner note, as they trailed harmlessly past or struck the rocks about us with a joyful 'zing'. It was cold that night, but dirt caked on our bodies as the sweat poured off while we dug at that hole, till finally we had it deep enough to lay in. We were fairly safe, so we slept the night, and at daybreak were up early and quickly at work again, deepening and improving the hole. But we were in for a harrowing time, as they had an observation post who could see us. Every time we moved, they threw everything they had at us. We stayed there eight days and were never game to leave our hole till we could spot another in our path, as we were shelled day and night.[7]

Lying prone during daylight hours in trenches or *wadis* beyond the defences, the Diggers emerged at dusk. Some readied for a reconnaissance patrol, as practised at Bardia. Their nocturnal forays were again essential to determine weak spots in the outer defences and to gauge the enemy's strength. It was a dangerous and nerve-wracking activity. Captain Paul Tomlinson, 2/4th Battalion's medical officer, recorded men 'very nervous with anxiety' and two self-inflicted wounds.[8]

'We have had some close shaves and I had a hell of a doing at Tobruk', Private Selby Dean (2/4th Battalion) confided to his parents.

I was caught one night when I was out in No Man's Land doing some spotting and a machine gun nest got on to me. What a feeling it was! I got

home next morning just at daybreak and every time I heard a gun go off that day I'd jump.[9]

Lieutenant William 'Kemp' Field (2/8th Battalion), a Tungamah (Vic.) bank official, was killed during a patrol on 11 January. In a letter to Field's fiancée, Lieutenant John Strong outlined the circumstances of his death.

I spoke to him and the two men with him, as he left. He was to go into a nasty area, to obtain some vital information. When he and his patrol arrived at the area, he ordered his patrol to wait while he went on alone to see if it was safe. Not long afterwards, the enemy opened fire on him, in a terrific fashion, and he did not return. His patrol saw him afterwards ... It was typical of him to take the risks himself, as he had done on two occasions previously, in the same area … His departure leaves a gap which cannot be filled … He was loved by his men, with whom he had been through some hellish experiences. In a very short time, those cringing dagoes will get short shrift. Last time they came crawling out of their holes flying white flags, in tens of thousands, after having killed some Australians, half a minute previously, whining and cringing like the cowards they are – and full of all conceivable treachery. It will be in great consolation to the friends and admirers of Kemp to have details concerning his heroism, which ultimately and unfortunately led to his death.[10]

Corporals Ivan 'Kit' Best (whom we saw at Bardia) and Victor Doyle (2/3rd Battalion), a greengrocer from Sydney, originally met on the bus journey to Ingleburn. The two friends were now ordered to reconnoitre Tobruk's outer defences, barbed-wire apron and tank trap. It was a bright moonlit night (on 12 January). Approaching the wire, Best set off a booby-trap. Both men were flung to the ground by the force of the explosion. Responding with mortar bombs and machine gun fire, garrison gunners failed to find their mark. Taking stock, Best noted the severity of his companion's injuries, his two legs smashed by shrapnel. Handing Doyle his automatic, with which to randomly fire shots, Best, also wounded in one leg, limped a quarter of a mile back towards his battalion. His cries for help were eventually heard, 'but it took six hours to cover seven miles' for a rescue party to reach him. Carried on an improvised stretcher fashioned from rifles and greatcoats, Best's two legs were splinted with bayonets. Inseparable, Best and Doyle later shared an ambulance to Mersa Matruh and eventually found

themselves in adjacent beds at Yaralla Military Hospital in Concord.[11] Convalescing at home in Goulburn, Best assured a local newspaper in April 1941 he was feeling 'tip top' and looking forward to returning to the battlefront. He was discharged as 'medically unfit for service' on 13 April 1942, a month before Doyle.[12]

* * *

Relishing army life, Private Charles Freeman spent 'six days lying out in front of the Italian lines.'

It was a great time in front of their lines; we turned into night owls. We were in full view of the Italians and had to lie in shallow trenches all day. The holes were about 18 inches to 24 inches deep and just big enough to lie down in. Spent about 18 hours a day in these holes and only moved around at night. It wasn't as bad as might be expected. Went out on three patrols; got a bit hot with shelling and machine gun fire. Machine gun fire is all right but shelling frightened [the] hell out of me. And now we have come back a few miles for a spell. Don't know how much of this will get past the censor – he will probably cut most of it out. I've had a bath and a shave in about two pints of water, searched the clothes for chats and fleas, and am feeling up to meeting society again, even if the clothes are filthy. Looks like more tucker has arrived, so I'll stop for a while. I'm thriving on this kind of a life …

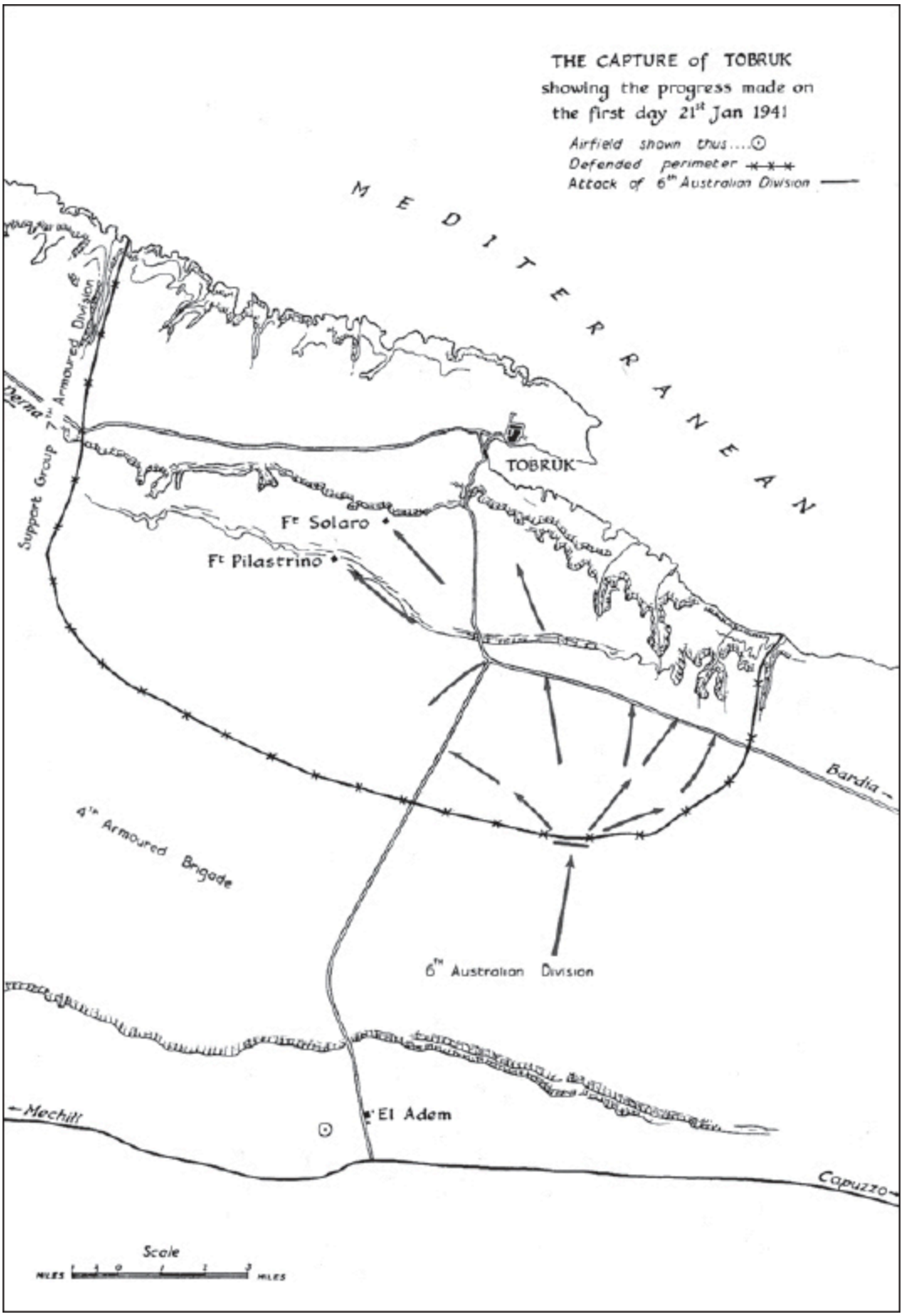
Sadly, as we will learn, this was the last sentence Freeman penned; his unfinished letter was found by a friend, Corporal Robert McEwan (2/8th Battalion), five days later.[13]

* * *

Mail from Australia was distributed along the front line. A group of correspondents found a signaller quietly reading his letters. 'It's a lovely war', he said to them, 'the postman follows us everywhere.'[14] Hampers were also distributed on the eve of the battle. Gorging on plum cake and coffee, the men of one platoon busily stuffed their pockets with chocolate, cake and pots of jam.[15]

‘My tin hat, which always felt so big, felt like a thimble’

Mackay’s plan for storming Tobruk was straightforward. The 16th Brigade would shadow a covering dawn bombardment. The infantry would charge a small section of the perimeter, cut the wire and create a gap 100 yards wide – a foothold from which to ‘bite deeply into the defences.’ Tanks from the 7th RTR and 17th Brigade infantry would then push forward to secure the fortress’ eastern sector, the 19th Brigade then driving north to seize the town and harbour. Mackay’s punctilious planning again specified details down to the smallest level, including where the dead from both sides were to be buried. A shot of rum was again to be issued before the attack, though with precaution ‘against men getting more than their share.’ All ranks would carry a tin of bully beef and two packets of biscuits. Prisoners would receive only captured rations; fraternisation was forbidden.[16]



General Iven Mackay's capture of Tobruk in many ways foreshadowed Erwin Rommel's successful assault 18 months later.

Originally scheduled for 20 January, D-Day was pushed back 24 hours to allow the number of operational Matilda II tanks to increase from 13 to 18. Sixteen captured Italian M13 and M11 medium tanks, now sporting white kangaroo livery, would be operated by the 6th Division Cavalry. Additional fire support would come from the machine gunners of the 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and 1st Cheshire Regiment, mortars mounted on Bren Gun Carriers, and the massed guns of the Royal Horse Artillery (RHA).

Reveille was at 2 a.m. on a cold, clear morning. 'In the half dark before we go into action', a raw infantryman (2/2nd Battalion) wrote to his parents, a 'last note to be sent back in case I do not come out.'

> This will be my baptism of fire, but with the rest of the boys I am looking forward to it cheerfully. Two of my mates were killed at Bardia. Will avenge them tonight. Don't fret about me. If I go [it is] in a wonderful way and for a good cause.[17]

Geoff Hall welcomed a 'cup of tea' and a tot of rum, 'just enough to warm us', as the infantry began forming up.

> Everyone talked in whispers and seemed to glide as we manoeuvred into position in the ghostly light of the moon. We moved off and whispered good luck and words of encouragement were exchanged as we passed other battalions and made our way through long lines of artillery with their crews 'standing silently' to wait for the second that would turn those dumpy, short-nosed machines into roaring beasts of destruction. We moved on and passed a long line of tanks as they rumbled on towards the enemy. Soon the first grey of dawn appeared and found us still winding forward and everyone tense and alert, knowing that it would be only a matter of minutes; nor were we wrong, for with a mighty roar a battery on our right opened fire ... Every gun seemed to be working overtime to keep up a continuous roar or to keep alight that flame that the flashes made against the morning clouds. A halt was called. We had reached the fire tape line and the signal to disperse in battle formation was given. After several minutes halt we moved off northward. The need for silence no longer remained, and I heard cheery remarks yelled at passing mates, one being: 'Could you go a beer now, Charlie?'[18]

As part of the preliminary softening-up, RAF Vickers Wellington bombers began pummelling the fortress and its airfields. RN gunboats, joined in, shelling inner defences. 'Listen to that terrific rumble!' Sergeant Albert Hertzberg exclaimed.

We all know that it's our Navy once again in action, and they send salvo after salvo crashing into the enemy defences. Gee! I'm glad the Navy is on our side. The 'Ities' are certainly getting to know what our big stuff is like.[19]

British destroyers also lay in wait should the crippled Italian cruiser *San Giorgio* attempt to flee from Tobruk's harbour.

Private Herbert Eastland (2/7th Field Ambulance) remembered a cold night, the ground 'his only shelter'.

A few shells were coming over, but not just where we were lying. The time gets close for the word to go. It is all quiet just for about ten minutes. We are still lying out on the tape. Then all at once from behind us, hell has let go. Our barrage has opened up ... By hell, it's hot. Now we have to wait a few minutes for the barrage to lift. It lifts, and off we go again. We find our first wounded. We fix them up, and off we go again with the infantry.[20]

Considerably less encumbered by kit than they were at Bardia, troops of the 2/3rd Battalion were the first to move off, ending a nervous wait, unable to smoke or talk. Private Richard Murray from Uralla (NSW) was among them; 'The boys were all sure of themselves and not a little proud of their win at Bardia and had no doubt as to the fate of Tobruk.'[21]

As he had done at Bardia, Private Allan Edwards waited in a hole for the signal to move off, although with less opposition this time, 'we didn't get nearly as many shells pelted at us.' The opening bombardment, the largest to date in the Western Desert, erupted at 5.35 a.m.

What a barrage it was! We lay there in the dark and the shells from our guns landed just 100 yards or so away from us. It was terrific. The shells flew very low over our heads; the whine of them was bad enough, but the explosions were terrible, flying pieces of red-hot shrapnel flew everywhere. Tarz and I lay there together waiting for the word to move forward. Before we were told to move, there were five 'Bangalors' [Bangalore torpedoes] to go off … These were placed under the barbed wire to blow a track through.

They went off and what a noise! It shook the earth and did a good job so far as the wire was concerned. It tore it to bits, and we went through under what is known as a creeping barrage, just moving ahead of us to keep the 'Ities'' heads down. Our company was first through the wire, our Battalion being the forward one of the division. Each platoon had a Post to take. The barrage was so good that the first platoon's task was wiped out; our platoon marched on and took up position. There was a nasty man with a machine gun there, but we were too quick for him; when he opened up, we had got round one side of him and his gun would not traverse round to us ... like stubborn fools, we kept after them and, as usual, when we got close, up went the old white flag. I breathed a sigh of relief, for they had only to turn their gun round and there wouldn't have been anything left of us. We got hundreds of prisoners here and our Sergeant was recommended for the DSM.[22]

(Allan Edwards was killed in action the next year on 6 November 1942 during the fighting in New Guinea.)

Sergeant Albert Hertzberg watched as infantry moved forward 'behind our terrific barrage'.

It is still dark and the flashes from our guns illuminate the battle area with a rather ghostly effect … We are working furiously, firing as fast as possible ... We haven't even time to duck some of the 'Itie' shells which land dangerously close – within feet of us.[23]

Shadowing a creeping artillery barrage presented its own challenges, Geoff Hall explained. 'The biggest problem is "drop-shorts" (the terror of all infantry), which are the shells that fall anything up to 200 yards short, thus falling amongst our own men.' Hall's section fell under enemy counter fire.

It did not take the dago long to collect his wits, and soon he started shelling us with shrapnel and HE [high explosives]. But those forward files of ours kept moving forward. Everyone had the battle lust. I saw a shell burst right in the midst of our right leading section; there was a yell for stretcher bearers, and as the dust from the explosion cleared there were the remaining eight men of the section still plodding on with their faces towards the enemy lines and (I'll bet) their only thought was to get even with the dagoes for the comrades they had just seen fall. It was an inspiring sight.[24]

Hall swore ‘never [to] forget going through that gap, and yet all I can remember is deafening screams of shells, dirty red and black shell bursts, rumbling tanks, racing trucks, walking wounded, an advanced RAP, a smoky haze ...’[25]

‘Terribly frightened’ going ‘over the top’, Private Roger Rye (2/1st Battalion), a Gloucester (NSW) journalist, reflected upon his good fortune.

God only knows how we missed getting hit during the course of the battle. I could feel the wind of the bullets as they whistled past me, and splashes of shrapnel were landing all round us. I really thank God I was spared this time. It was pretty horrible, some awful sights, but I suppose that is war ...[26]

Running headlong into the darkness in their excitement, some troops unknowingly ventured too far from the prescribed course. A bright flash announced the tripping of a booby trap, killing three and wounding 20. Speed, as the Diggers had learned at Bardia, was essential. Resistance in the forward line posts varied enormously. Some failed to return fire at all, with comparatively little expended ammunition noted after the battle. Post R57, for example, was reached before the sheltering defenders had even emerged, surrendering without a shot being fired. Post R55, however, proved more stubborn; the struggle lasted more than 30 minutes. Progress, in all, was good, with five perimeter posts surrendering within an hour, yielding a bridgehead a mile wide and a mile deep. Lieutenant Charles Terrey’s (2/3rd Battalion) platoon was one the first to capture a post. The Italians, in his opinion, ‘fought a bit better than [at] Bardia, sticking to their guns quite a lot longer and making us uncomfortable with machine guns.’

I don’t think I’ll ever enjoy bees anymore, had too many bullets whizzing close, thank you. I don’t rightly remember what happened in the first hour at Tobruk, except that we seemed to be cutting wire, throwing grenades and using the old bayonets without ever stopping and advancing all the time. Nothing stops these lads once they get going, they just walk through the toughest fire in a way which makes it a pleasure to be with them. Anyway, we did our job rather well, according to our senior officers, who remarked favourably on the show. We lost a few cobbers but were able to avenge them pretty quick, though there aren’t enough Dagoes in the work to replace even one of them. Anyway, God spared me in both shows and I came through with only some near misses. My old tin hat – that I love so

much now – will have to be replaced, as something hit it rather hard and bent it a bit, but strangely enough I don't remember where it happened. A man has a lot to be thankful for these days, I just don't know how we got through some parts, but as I said before the Bloke up top must have been looking after us.[27]

'Just as dawn came, so did the bullets and shells', scrawled Private Jack 'Staf ' Staples (2/1st Machine Gun Battalion), outwardly unperturbed as he moved ahead into the unknown.

Everyone was happy, laughing and joking when the bullets and shrapnel came close. Cigarettes were glowing as we passed through the barb wire, then on through merry hell for an hour or more. Our company lost only three or four men wounded and two dead. All of us boys were frozen stiff in the feet after being out all night. I had my rifle slung on the shoulder and the left thumb hooked in the strap of my webbing and swaggering along as if on the way to a picnic. I wasn't a bit scared of the bullets or shells, only as we had just about reached our objective some dirty Dago was shooting an anti-aircraft gun point-blank at us. And, baby, was this kid saying his prayers as everyone else was? He only got two of us, though, as our guiding angel, the infantry tanks came along ... much to our pleasure. The greasy sons of the devil throw everything they have at you and then when you get near them, they come out on the ground in hundreds, all waving a white rag which they all seem to carry in their kits.[28]

Thirty-four-year-old Private Alec 'Swampy' MacDonald of Shellharbour (NSW) similarly passed through the outer wire apron, where he waited until daylight before tackling one of the perimeter posts. 'What we did to them then was a shame, but when we counted up we had 14 men out of 30 put out of action one way and another. Of the ten I was with, only three of us were left not wounded.'[29]

The toll continued to rise. Private Jim Sullivan (2/3rd Battalion), a 30-year-old driver, stormed an enemy post: 'We charged with bayonets and took it but lost nearly all our men'.

The Lieutenant was shot the next day and died. A chap by the name of _____ was also shot. He did not know what hit him. A mate of mine [possibly Private John Delaney] was shot through his tin hat. It went in the

front and out the back. He also did not know what hit him. The worst part is that he leaves a wife and two kiddies.[30]

Sullivan was wounded thrice, 'two slugs in the wrist and one in the shoulder. They are not even sore', he reassured a Cootamundra (NSW) relative. 'I had a lucky escape, believe me. One piece of shrapnel went past my head. It just cut the skin behind my left eye.'[31]

Other casualties on the first day included Private William Hill and Sergeant Rienzi Williams (2/2nd Battalion). 'I copped it at Tobruk, at six in the morning', Williams explained in a letter to his wife, with shrapnel wounds in his arm and leg. Treated in a New Zealand Field Hospital, 'the Sisters had a job scrubbing 10 days' dirt off me before they could get at my real skin', he added.[32] Hill, a Queenslander from Mackay was 'put out of action ... outside a "sangar" [a small stone breastwork].'

We thought they were going to surrender. They opened fire, and the first burst spattered the ground at my feet. So did the second, but a bullet ricocheted off the rubble, and hit me below the left knee. I was then in a dangerous position. I was under a terrible nervous strain and was still being shot at. My tin hat, which always felt so big, felt like a thimble, as the dust flew up all round me. It went 'ping' more than once, as the bullets struck it. The ground was perfectly flat, except for a slight rise some hundred yards back. Two men from a section behind stopped and applied a ligature to my leg, at the risk of their own lives ... Then the stretcher bearers came, and I was taken back. What a journey! With a smashed knee it was 'crook'. From our RAP on the field, I travelled the first five miles in an ambulance over a terrible road … spent the night at a 'Tommy' dressing station, where everything possible was done for us.[33]

'I was unfortunate enough to "cop" a couple of bullets in the leg – one in the side of the knee and the other a little higher up', Private Leo Leslie (2/8th Battalion) wrote from the comfort of his 'very nice hospital' bed in Alexandria. 'Luckily, they are clean wounds but still pretty painful. No doubt a bullet pulls you up with a jerk; felt as though someone had run a hot iron through my leg.'[34] (Invalided back to Australia, Leslie attended a celebratory euchre party and dance held in in his honour. His return from the war, the chairman of the Rand Patriotic Committee (NSW) proclaimed, marked 'one of the proudest moments in the life of our little community'.)[35]

Corporal Arthur Skene, whom we remember dwelling on what the future might hold, had his campaign ‘unexpectedly and disappointingly cut short when an Italian hand grenade bowled’ him over. Angry over his ‘superficial injuries’, Skene grumbled:

I was disappointed because after surviving Bardia, where our battalion were the first to penetrate the defences, and after having lived through that particularly heavy barrage, in which I, at the time, thought no life possible, I had high hopes of seeing this campaign through to its completion. My disappointment was amplified at being hit by one of these toy bombs, which are all noise … my disappointment gave place to shame that I, so lightly wounded, should be sent away back behind the lines with the poor blokes who really were suffering.[36]

Private Alan Hutchison (2/3rd Battalion), a farm hand from Granville (NSW) was a childhood friend. Writing to their former Boy Scout leader, he discussed Skene’s injury.

I met a cobber of his, a chap named Thompson, from Lidcombe, and he told me that Art was hit on the shin with a Dago grenade. His leg is broken, but it will mend all right from all accounts ... We haven’t got much respect for their grenades ... Very noisy, but not much effect. They burst on contact but must be very close; so Art was unlucky to be knocked, but lucky it wasn’t something like a Mills [bomb] burst on his leg.[37]

* * *

Salvation Army Major Harold Hosier was present in an advanced dressing station, providing refreshments to the wounded.

… they were just marvellous; no complaints, bearing their pain and suffering; without a murmur, and considering the other chap. It was quite a common thing to hear, ‘Take that chap, he’s worse than I am.’ My heart was saddened to see our manhood suffer, but my heart was gladdened to see the spirit of the men. I was proud to be among them. This has been no easy campaign, but our men have done splendidly and no matter how tough conditions are, they just say, ‘We can take it’, and they do.[38]

The 2/4th Battalion's RMO, Captain Paul Tomlinson, logged similar sentiments.

Private [Henry] Hamburger with a shrapnel wound of the leg would not let me look at him till I had seen all the others. [Private Randall] Barlow with a piece of shell through the posterior aspect of the skull. Bone protruding. Had asked me for a few moments before I arrived. Scalp bleeding profusely – a good soldier this man.[39]

(Private Randall Barlow later died of his wounds at 2nd New Zealand Hospital on 21 February 1941.)

* * *

Performing opposite roles, a Guildford (NSW) father and his son, Private James Nicholas (2/4th Battalion) were reunited 'in the middle of the battlefield.'

I met dad [Sergeant Theodore Nicholas] ... with bullets and shells whistling about our ears. He was racing around patching up wounded Aussies, and I was wounding or killing Dagoes ... I saw him again after Tobruk fell into our hands. By gee he's looking well.[40]

'We put a machine gun on them'

Twenty-one enemy perimeter posts had fallen by 9.00 a.m. Any delusions regarding Tobruk's invulnerability were crushed. Australian troops and British tanks now fanned out to overcome scattered pockets of resistance. The infantry had little patience for any defenders slow to surrender. Bloodied at Bardia, they were quick to lob hand grenades into obstinately defended positions. Italian resistance, in general, fell short of what Bardia had thrown up. Private Thomas Mawhinney reckoned it was 'a regular cakewalk'.[41]

'After a slight scrap', Corporal Geoff Hall's men took the Sector HQ, collecting 'some 250 prisoners including a general and his staff '.

After cleaning out the prisoners we were indulging in a spot of 'looting' their canteen, when suddenly a battery of artillery whom we thought to be out of action, opened fire on the canteen. A shell landed amongst three or

four of us standing in the doorway of the canteen, seriously wounding two, but all that happened to me was that I had a touch of shell shock, but not bad enough to go back to the RAP. The dust hadn't cleared away from the shell bursts before the Tommies had four Vickers guns pumping rounds into the artillery crew at a range of over 2000 yards, and in two minutes had the guns disabled and every man dead about it. Then they quietly dissembled their guns and set about cleaning them.[42]

'We had to laugh occasionally to see hundreds of men waving their little white flags like a lot of frightened dogs', Private Harold Scott (2/11th Battalion) mocked, noting treacherous incidents and the fate of those responsible.

Many a time they would wave their flag and when we were within a hundred yards or so of them, they would open out on us with light machine guns. Or they would have their hands up and when we approached, let us have a few hand grenades they had concealed. It is quite unnecessary to tell you what happened to these swine.[43]

More reserved in his commentary, Correspondent Gavin Long revealed:

The whip was cracked, but not too often. On one occasion a prisoner in a big group was truculent and seemed likely to cause trouble, perhaps a stampede. This was a risk too great to be taken, and the risk was removed.[44]

* * *

Frank Hurley, official AIF photographer in both world wars, stopped to boil a billy. Around him 'shells burst harmlessly.' Like many in the assailing army, Hurley marvelled as downcast prisoners 'walked in by the thousand entirely of their own accord. It was such a show as a Hollywood producer would revel in.'[45]

Surveying the battlefield, ambulance driver Private Herbert Eastland noted at midday how the tide had already turned, writing: 'things don't look so bad'.

Most of his guns have been put out of action or hoisted the white flag. They will give you hell up to within 200 yards of them, then up go their hands, with a white flag flying. And believe me, that gets the boys' blood up! Still

the prisoners flow in, running like hell, with their hands up. Nobody with them. You just point back and they get rounded up behind you. We have just passed all of his outposts and some of his field guns, and plenty of his machine gun posts. Now we are about three miles from the town. The forts are getting hell knocked out of them by the Royal Air Force. By gosh, it's wonderful to watch those airmen. Everything he's got he's putting up at them, still they continue to drop 'their eggs'. The air is just full of anti-aircraft fire, but they don't get a hit; all round them the shells are bursting. Fred and I are in a shell-hole watching this, just having a smoke.[46]

* * *

Approaching Tobruk's harbour, Private Gordon Williams (2/11th Battalion) came under fire from the immobilised Italian cruiser *San Giorgio*.

[It] opened up on us with everything she had in the way of antiaircraft, and our planes couldn't get low enough over the barrage to bomb her effectively, so we ran some men up on a ridge over the harbour and opened fire on the ship with machine-guns. That didn't seem to have much effect on her either, so we had to lie low that night and wait until the artillery came up in the morning. The cruiser had held us up long enough so the artillery decided to blast it off the face of the harbour. But during the night the Dagos set fire to her and abandoned ship.[47]

The harbour presented a scene of 'mass of destruction'. RAAF wireless operator Cuthbert 'Vince' Gardiner watched the enemy warship burn in the harbour, the centrepiece in a miscellany of abandoned vessels.

Beached with their bows high on the sand were two cargo ships; and the harbour itself was filled with sunken small ships, only their masts and funnels visible above the water. It is after seeing these things and the destruction of beautiful buildings that one realises the horror of war.[48]

Closing on Tobruk's town, the infantry fought off a counterattack by nine medium tanks and several hundred enemy troops on foot with the assistance, and timely arrival, of Royal Horse Artillery anti-tank guns and two Matilda tanks. Clearly impressed by these vehicles, Sergeant Victor Carle (2/2nd Battalion), a Taree (NSW) market gardener, described how

‘they just crawl up to artillery posts and machine-gun nests and strike terror into the hearts of the enemy. Artillery shells just bounce off them like peas.’

Exhausted by the day’s combat, Harold Scott was jolted into action by a late afternoon skirmish.

It’s certainly a nerve-wracking business, this war. How the hell I never got hit I don’t know. He had our section scampering for shelter a couple of times. We were detailed to clean out some machine gun nests from the hills and got them all bar one the first day. As we were getting tired ... we got careless occasionally. Then he let us have it and did we run for shelter or did we! Take it from me we forgot our fatigue for a while.[49]

In a memorable exchange before nightfall, English-born Captain John Copland (2/4th Battalion) was leading a party of 34 Australians when an immaculately dressed Italian officer appeared, demanding a British officer. Copland, weary and dirty, was directed underground to meet with Petassi Manella. ‘There he was seated in state’, Copland discovered,

with his staff arranged around him. A fine old man with heavy grey moustache and a gorgeous uniform. I walked in. He stood up and saluted so I did likewise and offered him a cigarette. First of all he shook hands. I sent his staff out first, and then he and I followed. I felt sorry for the old chap. He kept wiping a tear away. He asked my name, and told me his ...

Unholstering his revolver, Manella presented it to his younger captor. Drawing upon his schoolboy French, Copland offered his condolences as best he could in this extraordinary situation: ‘*C’est la guerre’*. ‘*Oui*,’ Manella replied, ‘*C’est la guerre’*.[50]

* * *

Darkness had descended by 7 p.m. From his dugout Private Herbert Eastland looked over the town. A handful of guns were still firing. Food, fuel and ammunition dumps were ablaze. Hours later all firing ceased.

Tired, by gosh we are tired, and hungry. So we have a go at a tin of bully beef, and sleep. We had been walking, running, dodging, diving into shell holes since 4 o’clock that morning, and we have advanced about ten miles. The boys could have taken the town that evening, but it was a bit late, so they just stayed outside for the night.[51]

Sergeant Kenneth Lucas, too, was exhausted.

I rode a motorbike that day for 20 hours, with only a pause to snatch a bit of food now and again and finished up by falling off it ... at 2 a.m. Riding over scrub and through heavy sand in the dark (no lights) was no joke. I ached for days after.[52]

Stopping to eat after 14 hours' fighting, Private Frederick Woollams (2/3rd Battalion) enjoyed a cake, sent by the Bringelly-Rossmore Comforts Fund (NSW) and carried in his haversack throughout the fighting. 'You can imagine that it made a welcome addition to beef and biscuits.'[53]

* * *

'We had taken more than half of Tobruk, and had advanced 23 miles', Geoff Hall recounted, a 'world's record, we are told – and I believe it, for we were dog tired ... That night everyone slept; we had no guards, no sentries, for Tobruk was as good as ours'.[54]

'You got used to the sight of the dead'

Fighting continued, albeit briefly, the next day, 22 January. Leading a convoy into the town, Lieutenant Jack Eldershaw (16th Brigade HQ) from Rockview Station, Marrar (NSW), become one of the last casualties after his car struck a landmine. His death 'was a terrible blow to our unit and particularly to the Wagga [Wagga] boys, who had been together for so long', a friend wrote.[55]

The final pockets of resistance along the western perimeter collapsed in the afternoon of the second day, 29 hours after fighting began. Large bands of Italian defenders appeared under white flags, as we have read, some in parade-like formation. Admiral Massimiliano Vietina and his 1,500-strong naval contingent surrendered in a ceremony watched by Brigadier Leslie Morshead, commanding officer of the 18th Australian Brigade (and future commander of the 9th Division). An officer was overheard afterwards joking that it was difficult to tell whether he commanded an army or a navy, since many 'lads had helped themselves to a new sailor suit'.[56] Without an Australian flag to hoist in celebration, an elated soldier instead ran a slouch

hat up the flagpole outside of Vietina's headquarters in the centre of the town.

Tobruk was 'easily wrestled from us', Count Ciano diarised dolefully.[57] Acting Australian Prime Minister Arthur Fadden cabled Blamey to express his appreciation, following on from Bardia, that 'the fall of Tobruk might well be described as the second leg of a winning double.'[58] Celebrating one of the swiftest reductions of a fortress of that size in history, London's *Times* proclaimed: 'seldom has a victory over such a large area been more swiftly won.' Tobruk had fallen to 'triumphant Imperial forces', Launceston's *Examiner* rejoiced, 'and Britain has gained an important Mediterranean position. Again, Australian infantrymen were chosen to storm the enemy defences, and again they did a splendid job.'[59]

What the Italian press decried as a 'national calamity', was a boon for General O'Connor, a major victory netting 25,000 prisoners, including 2,000 sailors, 208 artillery pieces (the basis of the Australian 'bush artillery'), 87 medium and light tanks, and 200 vehicles. Harbour demolitions were modest, while the power station, water distillation and refrigeration plants were all captured intact. The cache of mineral water and tinned food, another bonus, was enough to feed the occupying army for two months, or, as Private James Nicholas joked, 'Sydney'.[60]

Australian casualties were light – 49 men dead and 306 wounded. Captain Patrick Shanahan, whom we saw earlier at Bardia, presented two reasons for the 6th Division's success at Tobruk:

Firstly, capable leadership; secondly, defective enemy shells, many of which landed in among our boys or close to them. On an average three out of six did not explode on landing. I believe they are lying about the ground like jarrah logs.[61]

Mackay singled out the invaluable support provided by armour and artillery in combination with divisional teamwork – 'everyone from the staffs down to the newest recruit.' The Italians, he claimed, 'won't surrender if you go at them in a half-hearted way but will fight on.'

But when an attack is prepared by big artillery fire and tanks are employed with determined infantry following up, giving them no peace, they realise the odds are against them and that they might as well surrender as be killed. I think that is the reason for the large numbers of prisoners that we take, and

of the fighting ending as quickly as it has. It all shows that if you have the weight of artillery and heavy armoured vehicles, the man with the machine gun and rifle cannot stand against you. I think this is the cheapest way to go to war. Both Bardia and Tobruk have shown very few casualties on either side. Seemingly impregnable positions were taken quickly, and to possess tanks is economy. They save human lives.[62]

* * *

Charles Freeman's unfinished letter, which we read of earlier, was chanced upon by his friend Corporal Robert McEwan (2/8th Battalion) after the battle. Freeman was killed in action on 21 January 1941. 'And so passed one of the finest, whitest and gamest Australian gentlemen God ever put breath into', McEwan concluded in a letter to a friend recounting Freeman's death.

We went through the battle of Bardia in fine style. Had a few escapes but enjoyed it. Then came Tobruk. At a place called 'Jittery Corner', we laid out in front of the Italian lines under very severe shelling and got out all right. Two nights before the attack on Tobruk we marched 25 miles to another place where the attack was to be made. On the day of the battle, we started off at 5 am. And were to cross the starting line at 7.30 a.m. We came under terrific shell fire but kept going. Then our company was held up by six Italian tanks, which gave us a very hot time for a while, but we beat them off. After that, we captured a big store and ammunition dump. There was plenty of wine and tinned fruits, milk and chocolates and lots of other toothsome articles, and we had a feast at that spot. Late in the afternoon, I saw Chas for a while, and he was having a great time. There was some fierce fighting there for a while, but they surrendered. It was Charlie's platoon that went out to bring the prisoners in, but after waving the white flag some vile swine fired a machine gun. Chas fell, wounded. Then they threw a hand grenade at him while he was wounded on the ground. It exploded on his side, and a piece of the bomb remained in him. He was carried straight back to the first aid post by one of our pals. He said Charles gave him a message to me. Charles said, 'Tell the Big Stiff I'll be back in a week or two,' but the poor kid died that night. He was buried at Tobruk with full military honours by our padre ... Charles was the best pal I ever had,

and none will ever realise how much I miss him. The men responsible for his death will never live to tell the story. We put a machine gun on them, and about 50 or 60 paid the penalty for the foul deed. That is about as full a description of what happened that day as I can remember. I have been very fortunate up to date. Had many lucky squeaks, but then, 'the devil looks after his own.'[63]

* * *

'Swampy' MacDonald was one of only three men out of ten in his section not wounded.

I was lucky to get through without a scratch but had a few close shaves. A bayonet thrust went clean through my trousers and underpants near the thigh and never touched the skin. Somehow, I feel quite confident that I will not get killed over here.[64]

Providence also smiled on Private Raymond Newson when a bullet pierced his trouser leg, 'but it never touched me ... there was a couple of times when I wished my tin hat was big enough to crawl under.'[65] (Newson later died on 27 May during the battle for Crete.)

Three of the 'Dubbo boys' we met earlier – 'Viv' Dawson, Brian 'Spud' Stevens, and Bruce Kerdavid – all received minor wounds. 'We all came through Bardia without a scratch but weren't so lucky at Tobruk', Dawson stoically recounted.

Bruce, 'Spud' and I each had small shrapnel wounds in our legs. Mine is only a very small flesh wound in the back of the right thigh. Bruce copped his above his left knee, and 'Spud', in the right leg. None of our wounds is at all serious. 'Spud' says the doctor thinks he may still be carrying his piece in his leg. Bruce's is only a flesh wound like mine. The shell burst on our right, and a piece of shrapnel just nicked my right thigh and then went on to put a small scratch in my left thigh.[66]

* * *

Having 'had two cracks at the enemy and have done pretty well', Private Ronald Piper (2/1st Battalion), a Sydney clerk, harboured no hostility

towards the Italians,

... not even after they had slung everything in their hands at us; they are just human when you see them at close quarters. I wish they'd all be sensible and throw it in, then we could all pack up and go home, without too many being hurt. But then, that's hoping for a bit too much! I suppose there's nothing left for it but to go in and give them another lacing.[67]

'I will never be convinced that these people wanted war'

The end of the fighting at Tobruk brought a now-familiar problem – guarding tens of thousands of prisoners in open-air cages. Their pathetic state was troubling. Assigned the 'colossal job' of providing for the POWs, Lieutenant Colonel Frederick Chilton found himself challenged by 'an inadequate enclosure, [a] lack of food and water, and no blankets.'

I inspected the area ... and felt disgusted by at the lack of sanitation, food and water. Prisoners were collapsing from exposure and thirst but the task was made even more difficult by the large numbers pretending to be so affected and also by the fact that the Italian nature seems to be such that they cannot endure any hardships. The lesson of Bardia should have been heeded and provision made for the adequate disposal of these men.[68]

Housed in 'tremendous wire enclosures', as Privates Ernest Osbourne and John Barber shared in a joint letter home, misfortune struck when Italian 'dive bombers came over and dropped bombs, which killed about 300 of them'.[69] The mass of forlorn prisoners alarmed Private Roger Rye, a predicament he found more onerous than combat itself.

At present we are guarding thousands of prisoners near the battleground. It's a much worse job than fighting. Some of the sights are horrible. I don't think there has ever been so many prisoners taken in history. It's one big problem feeding and watering them, and on the first day or two before things were organised it was terrible to see them – men dying of thirst and exposure, going mad and stampeding. I never want to see the like of it again as long as I live. A great many of them didn't want to fight and now they are pitiful to behold. There are four prisoners helping me and some others on a watering place and they are really decent coves. They show us photos of their wives and children and try to talk to you, but it is hard to understand

them. We give them extras, like cigarettes and biscuits and an extra mug of water, but it is hard to be kind when there are so many suffering. One of the helpers gave me some Italian money and his address in Italy and wanted me to write to him, but I am afraid it will be a long time before he sees Italy again.[70]

'I never want to be a prisoner of war', Private Leonard Pendlebury (2/7th Battalion) of Sale (Vic.) made clear. 'Just imagine trying to feed and water 20 or 30 thousand men every day in a place where water is worth its weight in gold.'[71] The apparent youthfulness of the Italians affected Private Hollister Dean (2/43rd Battalion), a 32-year-old butcher from Kadina (SA).

I managed, by holding up my fingers and screwing my lips up, to get some of the older ones to understand that I wanted to know their age. I was sorry afterwards that I did. One was 15 and another 16. Prisoners of war at that age! It makes one realise, that after all, the British Empire stands for something that these countries appear to know nothing about. Could you see young lads of that age in Australia being forced to put uniforms on? In the same batch of prisoners there were men who appeared to be older than you dad and who should have been or had the right to be enjoying themselves like the old folks in Australia are allowed. I will never be convinced that these people wanted war.[72]

(Dean was later awarded the Military Medal 'for extreme courage and devotion to duty' at El Alamein on 17 July 1942. He was killed in action in New Guinea on 2 October 1943.)

* * *

In an odd encounter, Private Roy Lovett (6th Carrier Company) was assembling prisoners when one addressed him in fluent English about relatives in the Richmond River area of New South Wales. Holidaying in Italy before the war, the unfortunate traveller – like those we read of in Bardia – was conscripted and sent to Libya. 'I never fired a shot in this war and never had any intention of doing so', he explained to Lovett. Learning of his brother among the victorious Australians, arrangements were made for the two men to be reunited. Lovett afterwards informed the brothers' parents of the serendipitous meeting.[73] Heartbreak had earlier struck the

Lovett family at Bardia. Roy's younger brother, Cyril (2/2nd Battalion) died in the first day's fighting, falling in the presence of another brother, Arthur. Pinned down by heavy fire, Arthur Lovett lay in an exposed position until dusk, returning to give 'a clear and valuable account of what he had observed during the afternoon.' Cyril Lovett was remembered as a keen athlete and dux of Lismore High School. His father, Thomas, a 1st AIF veteran, served in the militia at Tamworth. Arthur was later wounded in the shoulder in Greece. In what he called his 'narrowest escape', on 24 April he was aboard the Greek yacht *Hellas* awaiting evacuation when German dive-bombers appeared over Port Piraeus, scoring five direct hits. He was finally disembarked two days later.[74]

'Well, Tobruk is in our hands and I am still alive'

Private Alec Macdonald relished a few days' rest after six weeks in the front line. 'I was never so dirty in my life. We went close to four weeks without a wash or a shave. I have left the mo[ustache] grow, and it's a beauty.' Exploring Tobruk's battered town, he noted the Roman Catholic Church, practically 'untouched by any shell or bomb.'

> The inside of it is very nice. The town was evidently evacuated by the women and children before we besieged it, as there were none there when we took it. But the schools and houses are there, with all the furniture and women's clothes still in them. Some wonderful things just lying about.[75]

Entering the church, a group of solders found the pipe organ still intact. A member of the party started to play 'Home, Sweet Home'. All joined in, the scene observed by a correspondent. 'The organ was then closed, and the party, hats in hands, went out into the desolate and depressing street of the little town with not one dry eye among them.'[76]

Tobruk's Roman Catholic church. (State Library of Queensland)

Billeted in the town, Private Jack 'Ripper' Bynon luxuriated 'in a big hotel, sleeping in beautiful beds, with sheets and everything else.'

The furniture we are using for firewood would make many a housewife envious. I am writing this letter whilst sitting in a big armchair at a beautiful mahogany writing desk with a typewriter in [*sic*] it. We have just come back from a swim in the harbour. It was most enjoyable, too, after being in the desert for so long.[77]

Another New South Welshman, Private John Bishop, had left his sheep property at Walcha to enlist. As 'an old hand at the game now – two battles I've been through', he relaxed in a 'cosy' billet, writing home with a purloined gold fountain pen.

Well, Tobruk is in our hands, and I am still alive. Never got a scratch. I think they threw everything at us but the kitchen stove. It wasn't as bad as Bardia, though ... As usual my C.O. was the first into it. We must be the

goods ... My mate, 'Invincible John,' and l have a room together and half a dozen Italians to wait on us. When we get out of bed in the morning, they have the breakfast ready for us, one to shave us, one to wash our clothes and sweep the room. Its *tres bonne*. I don't know how long it is going to last, but while it does, I'm going to make the most of it. I have been into the township of Tobruk a couple of times lately beer hunting but failed miserably. Beer is a burning question here. Australian beer and goods in English canteens and we Aussies can't buy it. A bit rough, isn't it? On my last venture to the town, the provost captain politely but firmly requested me to leave the canteen premises before he had me forcibly ejected. Knowing me as you do, well! – I did get the beer, though! Needless to say, I have tons of souvenirs. My wristwatch and pocket watch (souvenirs, of course) are going like champions.[78]

Driver Roy Sherwood wangled some new footwear. 'We are supposed to have captured about 40,000 prisoners, so we have most of their belongings. My boots were done, so I took a new pair, Dago officer's, too. That is the only thing we're allowed to wear of theirs.'[79]

Savouring a rare moment to bathe 'in a whole gallon of water', Major Roderick Macdonald felt 'marvellously clean' as he recounted recent events to friends in Grafton (NSW).

Our troops and the British with us are doing a marvellous job in this horrible country. We haven't slept in a tent for about five to six weeks, nor had much comfort or anything ... we just go on and on dealing it out to the Italians and every time we come across them they get an awful hiding ... We are all marvellously fit and well and very pleased with ourselves.[80]

Private Alan Hutchison was comfortably installed in 'the best house I've ever lived in'.

We can get eggs and bread up the town, and some milk (tinned), preserved fruit, also some bananas. We are using Italian money. The Arabs haven't woken up yet that it is no good, so we are spending as fast as we can. There'll be a howl when they wake up! I noticed some pigeons roosting on a place and went up after dark, but some thieving cow had got there before me ... Taking it all round, we are doing fairly well, and it almost seems that the Libyan part of the show is over. Where next, who knows?[81]

(Hutchison was killed on 6 November 1942 in New Guinea fighting the Japanese.)

* * *

'I saw a lot of comedy, also tragedy', Driver Bernard Atherton weighed. 'I saw a battalion marching out of Tobruk. They had been in a hardware shop and painted their steel helmets all the colours of the rainbow.'[82] On a more sober note, Lance Corporal Frederick Elsley (2/4th Battalion) disclosed to his mother in Parramatta (NSW), 'What happened there [at Tobruk] is nobody's business but our own, but we came through all right, and that's all that matters.'[83]

CHAPTER EIGHT

Derna – ‘a fairly tough nut to crack’

Axis propaganda transmissions entertained Corporal Herbert Mavay (2/1st Battalion), a Sydney clerk, after ‘one of the boys’ fashioned a shortwave wireless set for his truck.

We can get London, but the news session is always chopped out by the Huns. Their news session in English is funny to listen to, and the Italian one is a scream. If we believed all we heard from Rome we would be getting a father of a hiding, for it is amazing what the dagoes are doing to us – or so they say.[1]

But while enemy mouthpieces sang their country’s praises, General Richard O’Connor focused on his next objective: Benghazi, 250 miles west of Tobruk. Mackay, in the short-term, looked to seize Derna, 90 miles west along the coast road, on 26 January (then called ‘Anniversary Day’) as a gift for Australia. But it would be no picnic for the infantry, who would first have to cross perilously open ground bordering an airfield before negotiating a rugged landscape and precipitous *wadis*. ‘In some of the places we had to go’, Private Clyden Saltmarsh later joked, ‘it was so steep and far down that if a fellow fell over the side he would have starved to death before he hit the bottom.’[2] A single road snaking down to the town passed through rocky defiles covered by machine guns and artillery – country, Ian Fitchett described, as ‘wild as anything Gallipoli ever offered’.[3]

After ‘two days’ spell’ in Tobruk, Private George ‘Bill’ Taylor (2/11th Battalion) arrived outside Derna after midday on 25 January. This time there was no ‘zero hour’. Dismounting from his truck, Taylor went ‘straight into battle’. Resistance was immediate. And heavy. ‘They threw everything but houses at us’, Taylor recounted to his parents.[4] The West Australian

battalion spearheaded the 19th Brigade, which had seen little fighting in the two previous battles. It now found itself battling a determined enemy, including crack Bersaglieri troops, in a resolute rearguard action. Charging the airfield with fixed bayonets, Lieutenant John Bedells' (2/11th Battalion) platoon met a 'row of guns on the ridge ahead firing down on us'.

Anti-tank guns were firing … tracer armour-piercing bullets which whizzed down among us. We were told to go forward, go to ground and give covering fire for our two other platoons to advance up the right of the road, sheltered slightly by the embankment. However, they, too, received a warm welcome but kept going forward in bounds and doing a damn fine job. My platoon was receiving plenty of attention, and we were eventually forced to go to ground after a final 200-yard dash into some pits which the Dings had previously vacated.[5]

'We had to cross the landing ground, and this took us five hours', Corporal Cecil Rogers (2/11th Battalion), a Katanning (WA) clerk, recalled, '... I never before realised the value of a blade of dry grass, or a sprig of prickly bush as a means of cover.'[6]

Dust thrown up by an aerial attack, which Bedells states were six British bombers (the official Australian History says Italian aircraft), provided the opportunity for the Australians to advance 100 yards without drawing a shot, before going to ground again. An aerodrome hangar was eventually occupied. The next morning brought an unpleasant surprise: not all Italians had evacuated the surrounding position. The sandgropers, much to their horror, now faced 'three light tanks, two machine guns and an anti-tank gun stationed about 300 yards away.'[7]

'What a shock we received', Private Harold Morrison (2/11th Battalion) wrote, continuing the story.

Five of us opened fire on them, and what a hornet's nest we stirred up! They let go at us with everything they had, and it was pretty lively for a while. I happened to be using a weapon [a Boys anti-tank rifle] which would put any light or medium tank out of action, and just at that moment a tank came directly in my line. I let go at it, and the gunfire ceased. But just as I started on another, the first let go with his guns. Fortunately for us, the tanks wouldn't advance. If they had, it's quite on the cards that the lot of us would have been wiped out. Finally, they retired, and we were able to advance to

our platoon objective – a fairly substantial building. There the artillery shelled us consistently, and when it was over we counted over a hundred craters. At one time a crowd of us were sitting in front of the building talking when we heard the whine of a shell. We all ducked and the shell landed underneath a truck, which was blown to smithereens. We were showered with dust and pebbles, and a big piece of shrapnel struck the wall above our backs.[8]

An Australian burial party found one of the tank crew the next day, Captain Ralph Honner (2/11th Battalion) noted, 'with a burst across his face another across his chest and another across his stomach.'[9]

South of Derna at Martuba airfield, Rigger Aubrey Steele (RAAF) was sitting in his tent 'enjoying some Itie coffee' when news broke of approaching enemy tanks.

Jumping up, we rushed outside and could hear the tanks approaching. We were given orders to jump on any tender we could see, then all of a sudden we heard the AIF open up with their anti-tank guns. They cleaned them up in about an hour, so we went back and finished our coffee.[10]

* * *

Twenty-six-year-old Private Sydney 'Bill' Horner (2/11th Battalion) of Maylands (WA) was badly injured during the battle to take the aerodrome. 'He was only three yards from me and I heard him say he was hit a second then a third time', Captain Ralph Honner later wrote.[11] Stretchered to a casualty clearing station, Horner succumbed to his wounds the next day. His platoon commander later paid tribute to 'one of my best and most genuine soldiers'.

His bright face and witty talk during the storming of Bardia cheered the whole platoon. At Tobruk, and throughout a four days' march without a hot meal or blankets, he exerted his cheerfulness over all. It was at Derna, where our company had as its objective the aerodrome, which was as flat as a pancake. Without any support, it was essential that we take the hangar before darkness. Against a strong defence, we were pinned down for five hours, but under cover of the failing light, advanced to within 150 yards of the hangar. We then used the mortar, and whilst lying on the ground your

lad Bill, who was only four yards from me, was hit. The man on his left was also hit, but I remained untouched. I left the slightly wounded man with Bill to do what he could for him, as he seemed rather badly wounded, and the platoon passed on and took its objective. I then returned, under cover of darkness, to the two men, and within a few minutes first aid and transport were available. We evacuated the two, and Bill, who was badly wounded in the hand, back and leg, was treated by a medical officer, and removed to a clearing station. I understand he was given two blood transfusions, but the severe shock and loss of blood were too great, and he passed away in the arms of a field ambulance orderly two days later.[12]

Wretchedly, this letter announcing Horner's death reached his relatives long before any official advice. Listed by the Army as 'wounded, not severely or dangerously', his death did not appear in the official casualty list until April.[13] Army field censorship regulations at the time specified next of kin to be officially notified 'to avoid the unnecessary suffering that may be caused to relatives through information sent with best intentions by individuals.' Private cables and telegrams were forbidden. All details were to be disclosed in letters only, sent one month after the known casualty date.[14]

Striking a similar blow, Thelma Sneddon, the wife of Scottish-born Warrant Officer John Sneddon (2/11th Battalion), received telegram notification that her husband was wounded in action, though no doubt she was gladdened by the news he was 'not dangerously ill'. A letter from a hospital matron, however, alerted her to the seriousness of his condition – a bullet wound to the head. While Sneddon remained in a critical condition, a second telegram arrived stating his condition was unchanged. Evacuated from the Middle East with a compound fracture of the skull on the hospital ship HMAS *Manunda,* Sneddon was discharged as 'permanently unfit for service' in September 1941.[15]

'Forced to do that which a soldier dreads'

Robert Menzies encouraged heads of churches throughout Australia to observe Sunday 26 January 1941 as a day of thanksgiving and remembrance for the fall of Tobruk.[16] Fighting, meanwhile, continued at

Derna. Hearing enemy aircraft, an Australian sergeant gazed upward, noting a formation of enemy bombers under fighter escort.

Suddenly out of the blue came a lone [RAF No. 274 Squadron Hawker] Hurricane [P3722], and with guns blazing, he pounced on to a bomber, and, within a few seconds the plane, enveloped in flame, and with smoke pouring from its tail, crashed with a terrific explosion. Italian planes made off in all directions. Two Italian fighters dived earthwards to about 3000 feet. Little did they know that the Hurricane was also diving just behind them, and in quick succession they were sent crashing to the ground. Both pilots bailed out, but their parachutes failed to open. In the distance we could see enemy planes making for their base. A bomber and a fighter were wobbling so much that I doubt if they ever got back. The Hurricane pilot landed near us to get details of his kill [*sic*]. We congratulated him on his effort, and he told us that he has now 13 victims in the bag. 'Oh, gosh', he said, 'I wish I could have got another one, I am superstitious of 13, and I feel as if I am bound to suffer bad luck now.' He told us [wryly] that he was only using four [of the eight] machine-guns in his combat, stating that four guns are ample when dealing with Italians. Having enjoyed a smoke, the young Englishman [Flying Officer Ernest M. Mason] climbed back into his cockpit and taxied his plane for a run-off. He had barely gone 300 yards when his crate hit a boulder and capsized. Only damage done was a slightly bent propeller and broken wing tip. He jumped out laughing, and said, 'Well, everything's O.K. now. I have had my bad luck and my mind is at ease.'[17]

'All this took place very low over the top of the front-line troops', Flying Officer 'Imshi' Mason, RAF, corroborated. Suffering engine failure, the bearded British ace had made a forced landing 'next to a blazing CR.42'. He was shortly surrounded by a crowd 'of wildly enthusiastic Australians'.

Unfortunately, the ground was very rough and I burst a tyre and went up on my nose, wrecking the poor old aircraft with which I had got all my victories. I removed the Blackpool crest and was given a lift to the Australian squadron [3 RAAF] who were quite near.

Before leaving, Mason went over to the body of one of the Italian pilots whose parachute had failed to open.

He was about 700 yards from his still blazing machine. I had got him in the right shoulder, so he had not been able to open his chute. I went through his pockets and found a lot of interesting snapshots and a lot of letters ... I covered him with his parachute and weighted it down with stones.[18]

(Flying Officer E. M. Mason was awarded the DFC the following month, his recommendation noting: 'On 26 January 1941, he shot down three enemy aircraft thereby preventing the enemy formation of nine from attacking forward [Australian] troops.' Mason died on 15 February 1942 when his P-40 Kittyhawk was shot down in a strike against Martuba airfield in Libya.)

Private Don Wall (2/4th Battalion), a 31-year-old market gardener and one of the first men to enlist from the Boambee district (NSW), was killed in action on the same day, 26 January. The circumstances of his death 'will live forever in the memory of his comrades', a fellow Digger bled.

... our company of 60 strong was almost surrounded by a brigade of 3000 enemy troops and was forced to retire under heavy and concentrated fire. When our position was evacuated, Don Wall stayed back with his corporal and myself to carry back a wounded mate. While we gave him covering fire with Bren guns, Don dashed 50 yards under terrific fire and carried the wounded man back to a position where he could crawl to safety. It was just as this heroic action was completed that Don and his corporal ['Reg' Napthali] were shot. The enemy were closing rapidly, and it was impossible to carry them both at the same time [and] help the wounded man. So we were forced to do that which a soldier dreads – leave a comrade on the field to fall into enemy hands. Don died as he lived – a gallant gentleman, a worthy Digger, a brave cobber. His sacrifice shall not be in vain.[19]

Months later, the parents of Sergeant Reginald 'Reg' Napthali (2/4th Battalion) received the following letter – an expression of gratitude for their son's action.

I know these few lines will have you all startled for the moment, but it is from a friend of your most respected son, who soldiered under his command during the effort to break up the Italian army. Reg was a corporal but did the job of a sergeant until we reached Tobruk. Then our platoon commander had to leave us and your son took control, which was an

officer's job. Reg was very well liked and respected to the utmost extent, by the men he led into action. I was wounded on 28 January at Derna in Libya, during a counterattack, put on by the Italians. Reg and all the members of our platoon laid covering fire for me, under extreme difficulties, until I was safely in the hands of the stretcher-bearers. Bad luck intercepted our platoon then, one of the boys who came over to me under heavy fire and put me on his back, was shot down by machine gun fire, and died instantly. He was Don Wall. When another of the boys, 'Bert' Tout [Hugh Albernest Tout, 2/4th Battalion], saw us go down, he came out and was also killed. So you see, I owe my whole heart and soul to Reg and all members of the platoon who are now prisoners of war in Germany. Their names will never be forgotten, and I hope the day will come when I will be able to repay them some way or other.[20]

(Don Wall's parents received a cable from His Majesty King George VI the following year confirming their son's posthumous DSO for outstanding bravery at Bardia.)[21]

* * *

Private Clyden 'Cliff ' Saltmarsh grappled with more than the enemy at Derna.

We had to carry all equipment, rifles, Bren guns and [anti] tank rifles, or the 'elephant gun' as it is known out here, also blanket rolls and rations. I could hardly stand up under the weight we had on when we went to our positions. We had to cross a big *wadi*; it was 700 or 800 feet deep and very steep sides; it took us about four hours to get across it. The next day all that you had to do was show yourself a bit, and there would be machinegun bullets flying about; that night we went out on a fighting patrol; there was a big lot of us, we were going to make a job of it. We went a long way and didn't contact anybody, so a corporal and two men were sent out about 500 yards to listen for them; we got out there and could hear them making off, withdrawing. We reported back, then, the patrol should have stayed there all night. It was cold, I never felt anything like it, on the side of a hill. Next morning, we went on instead of back, did the next night without blankets but the next we got some dagoe blankets, also food and water which we needed very sorely by then.[22]

Arriving late to the battle, Private John 'Jack' McCombe (2/6th Battalion) and his platoon, 'went out on a job just at dusk and were bowling along thinking the Dagoes were miles away.'

We were the last [Universal] carrier in four, when we heard some machine-gun fire. Thinking it was Lieutenant [George] Warfe cleaning his Bren gun, I had my gun all tied up as I did not expect we would need it, when bullets started whizzing over our heads. We woke up to the fact that we had run into a machine-gun post. Our sergeant was injured, the bullet going through a pack, two Bren gun boxes and the back of the cabin and hitting him in the back; but as the force was taken out of it by that time, he got off with a bruised kidney. In the morning we went to look for the Dagos, but they had disappeared.

Derna fell on 30 January 1941. It 'proved a fairly tough nut to crack', Sergeant Kenneth Lucas affirmed. 'On the morning of the sixth day ... we took their last defended post.' 'Who said the Dagoes couldn't fight?', an Australian sergeant wisecracked. 'It was the first time in the present campaign that the Italians had really fought it out, and the severe nature of the country gave them every advantage', Ian Fitchett typed.[23]

Corporal Cecil Rogers' 'C' Company had the 'honour' of being among the first 'to enter the town and guard it.'[24] Although Derna was largely abandoned, prisoners were still taken, among them Amerigo Dumini, a notorious American-born gangster-politician responsible for the brutal murder of Italian politician Giacomo Matteotti in 1924, an event that shocked the world but helped to cement Mussolini's dictatorial authority.[25] The Duce's aspirations of reviving the grandeur of the Roman Empire, however, were fast unravelling. Graziani notified him on 1 February of his decision, with the British on his tail, to retreat further west.

'Another burst of cheering and clapping'

The desert ended at Derna. 'After all the dust, dirt and filth, through lack of water in the desert it was a great relief when our boys chased the 'Ities' beyond Derna', Sergeant Laban Wiseman (2/1st Battalion), a New South Wales jackeroo, noted, 'and we got into green country again. The land along coast there is some of the richest and most fertile, as well as being the prettiest we have seen on this side of the equator.'[26]

‘At this stage it was a case of our trying to go fast enough to keep up with the Italians as they seemed to be in headlong retreat’, Private Harold Dyer (2/11th Battalion) narrated.[27] Leading the chase, Major Denzil Macarthur-Onslow’s cavalry regiment ‘literally lived on the country as we drove, scrounging food and petrol as we went along’.

For five days after the fall of Derna, we were the vanguard of the Australian advance. On the afternoon that Derna fell, we were in Giovanni Berta keeping touch with enemy rearguards all day. The following day we drove on, capturing the towns of Luigi de Savoia and Cyrene. At Cyrene we were held up by a bridge being blown over a *wadi*. We were still in contact with the enemy but drove them on over rough country and captured two truckloads of machine-guns. That day we took 500 prisoners. Next morning, we reconnoitred right along the coast towards Apollonia. We could not drive into the town but walked the last three miles and hoisted a small Australian flag in the main square. All these towns were packed with civilians, who greeted us as the Libyans were out of hand and looting. Next morning, the squadron split, one driving along the road nearest the coast to Luigi Razza with the Infantry following, the other taking the more southern road to Slonta. Four days later we reached Barce with the infantry not far behind. The men following the top road reached there about the same time. Next morning, we joined forces and moved down through green and colonised country to El Abyar, then drove on to Benina, which is a huge airport. We filled in tank obstacles as best we could and reached Benina about 11 a.m. Here a small enemy patrol gave sharp resistance. We immediately sent out flanking patrols and the enemy retreated to Benghazi, about seven miles on. I had instructions not to proceed beyond this point and waited for the infantry to come up. About 4 p.m., Brigadier [Horace Robertson] arrived and ordered me to take into the town letters demanding capitulation. Four of us [plus 10 men] set off in a carrier with a white truce flag showing. We were met at the outskirts by two special constables who took us to the police headquarters and then to the mayor. All this time shots were being fired by the remaining soldiers at Arabs who were looting all over the town. Many fires were burning. The mayor gave us a letter from Graziani, and we suggested he follow us back to Benina and hand over the town. This he did the next morning, our sixth day out from Derna.[28]

Brigadier Horace Robertson entered Benghazi the next morning, 6 February. An accompanying officer recounted the bizarre scene.

Groups of Arabs, with donkey carts loaded with property – which probably was not theirs – gave the Fascist salute as he passed, as the Italians had taught them to do when an eminent Italian passed them. The cars passed a squad of Carabinieri (military police), with their rifles slung over their shoulders. In a small square in front of the Town Hall, a crowd of several thousand Italians, Greeks, and Arabs had assembled. When New South Wales infantrymen [2/4th Battalion] marched into the square the crowd began cheering. Then the brigadier's car drove in, and there was another burst of cheering and clapping. The brigadier told the mayor, through an interpreter, that General Mackay would arrive soon to take command of the city.[29]

In Benghazi, Sapper Claude Larking's (2/2nd Field Park) 'desert-weary' eyes were 'gladdened by a wonderful sight, a beautiful little town', lush with palms and gardens. 'Just picture me if you can', he put in a letter to a friend in Perth, 'after I've been working on a truck, coated from head to heels with grease and desert sand.' A farmhouse 'complete with bathrooms and heater' provided a blissful sojourn. 'Did I give it whacko?' he exclaimed. Since the war in Libya was at a 'standstill because we can't find any more Dagoes', London-born Larking believed he would be home by Christmas. 'Until we have written "finis" in Hitler's book of misdeeds, just keep on smiling and doing your bit at home and you can rest assured that we will do ours here.'[30]

Australian 6th Division troops enter Benghazi. Private Selby Dean recounted the experience: 'One of our battles is just over for a while and I wish they were all over. This place was taken without a shot being fired, although there was a short battle on the other side of the town.' (Argus Newspaper Collection of photographs, State Library of Victoria)

* * *

'The bombs exploding aren't too pleasant' Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Cunningham (2/1st Field Ambulance) of Bega (NSW) expressed in one of his last letters to a relative, 'but my dug-out is fairly comfortable.' The mental and physical strain was beginning to tell, he disclosed, having been in battle since 8 December. In one appalling incident, Dr Cunningham described Italian troops firing on their own men taken prisoner, killing 100 and wounding another 300. (Archibald Cunningham died in an air raid on 15 February 1941.)[31]

'I think the combat in these parts is all over now'

The bulk of the retreating Italian Army was intercepted by British tanks at Beda Fomm, south of Benghazi. Though heavily outnumbered – in tanks alone, roughly four to one – and increasingly low in fuel and ammunition, the British prevented most of the desperate Italians, many of whom fought courageously, from escaping into neighbouring Tripolitania. Gavin Long

visited the scene, an area of devastation resembling a 'Hollywood producers' conception of Armageddon.

Along the road and over the rocky red desert there were an uncounted number of big Lancia and Fiat trucks, some splintered by shellfire, some overturned; dozens of dark green Italian tanks with the dead still in them, lines of field guns standing where they fought and scattered boxes of ammunition [plus] tens of thousands of papers from the trucks laden with documents fluttering over the ground and clinging against the low tufts of camel bush and a few British tanks, with the unshaven dusty faced and grinning crews standing round them.[32]

Together with British armour, artillery and machine gunners, the 6th Division had traversed almost 600 miles of desert since the last day of December 1940, helping to annihilate Mussolini's Tenth Army. 'I think the combat in these parts is all over now, the Italians are well beaten', 40-year-old Sergeant Edward 'Ted' Earle (2/7th Field Ambulance) reckoned. Known as the 'Earl of Derna' for his habit of ranging across the battlefield in an ambulance puffing on a six-inch cigar, Earle was later captured in Greece by the Germans.[33]

'Well, here I am, still alive and well, and out of the fight for a while – and I think it will be some time before we see any more action', Private George 'Bill' Taylor informed his parents in Pingelly (WA).

Tired, bad-tempered and worn out generally ... It is quite a treat to rest in peace. We are doing parades, rifle drill, guards, etc., like we did before we went into action, and it is quite strange, but will keep us from getting too lazy and fat. It's a funny thing but, after all our hard times and sleepless nights I am just as fat as ever, and fatter than when I joined up, as my tunic is nearly too tight. We have a lot of narrow squeaks in this war but have to laugh afterwards.[34]

* * *

With the fighting (momentarily) over and time to think, troops mulled over their recent experience of war. 'Personally', Private John Mann mused, 'I never hope to make pretentions with regard to the liking of bloodshed, but

in keeping with many others, I can claim to have enjoyed taking part in this our first "big adventure"'.

... The reaction of actual war is great, and the starkness of reality brings an aftermath of emotional stress, but at the same time there grows a deep and sincere desire to carry on with this fight until a complete victory over aggression becomes an established fact, and the world once more can live safely under a democratic government that has stood the test of time.[35]

'The P.B.I. (poor bloody infantry)' had a 'hell of a time', Corporal Francis Telfer (2/11th Battalion), a former footballer, told his sister in Perth.

I have seen them under fire, and I am proud of every one of them. I don't ever remember knowing actual fear at home, but I have known it here and probably will again. It's something like performing in front of a big football crowd – a certain amount of nervousness until the game starts, then getting over it as the mind becomes occupied with the new task.[36]

For all its hardships, army life in the barren North African theatre held a special allure for Private George Young, whom we remember losing some of his 'best cobbers' at Bardia.

Taken all round, the desert suits me as far as health goes ... we are all on the best of terms with each other and every man pulls his weight ... We are real desert rats and won't like leaving the place, much as we curse it.

As to the future, penned Young,

I haven't given a thought yet as to what we'll do when it is all over. The reaction after the battle is much worse than before it and while it is raging, so I guess after the war, a fellow will be inclined to take it easy for a while, anyway.[37]

(Young subsequently saw action in Greece before disembarking in Australia in August 1942. Service in New Guinea followed, with a promotion to sergeant in 1945. Declared medically unfit through 'malarial debility', he was discharged in September 1945.)

* * *

Captain Roger Bramich (2/7th Field Ambulance) had seen 'enough of war' and its consequences to 'greatly increase my hatred of it and to make me long for the day when the world will know peace again.' Presenting a simpler opinion, a soldier penned: 'What interested me more than anything else in Tobruk was a group of Australian gumtrees. I had to rub my eyes to be certain that I was seeing aright.'[38]

* * *

Meanwhile in Sydney, the New South Wales Minister for Transport presented departmental statistics on 'war neurosis', correlating the effect of war news on road accident and mortality figures: 'accidents on the roads decrease greatly when the war is good. They were at their lowest when the Australians captured Bardia and Tobruk.'[39]

Menzies visited the Middle East not long after this latest piece of good news, while on his way to war-torn London where he planned to argue Australia's defence position, particularly in the face of a looming war against Japan. Landing in Palestine on 2 February, he undertook a series of official engagements, including battlefield tours of Bardia, Tobruk and Benghazi. Gunner Robert 'Bob' Derrick was present at an address, 'a very fine speech' given by the prime minister. 'I don't know what he thought of his soldier boys, we are a tough looking lot after so many weeks in the desert.'[40] 'Menzies blew down our ears, and told us what good fellows we were', Lance Bombardier Phillip Wortham (2/2nd Field Regiment) relayed to his parents. 'I have just flown over 1,100 miles of desert', the prime minster said, to which a quick-tongued serviceman shot back: 'Half your luck! We had to walk that far.'[41] Unimpressed by what he heard, Sergeant John Mott felt 'he would have been more appreciated if he had given us all a couple of days' leave to Benghazi, or even if he had put an extra pound in our pay books, we would have put up with it.'[42]

CHAPTER NINE

Giarabub – ‘a glorious victory’

The capture of Giarabub (or Jerabub) in Operation *Galley* was the coda to actions in North Africa against the Italians beginning in late 1940. The lengthy siege, in which Australian troops fired their first shots abroad in anger, finally ended on 21 March 1941 with the capture of the remote desert citadel. Some 150 miles south of Bardia and 20 miles from the Egyptian frontier, on the northern fringe of the Great Sand Sea and the foreboding Sahara Desert, Giarabub was first occupied by the Italians in 1926 as part of a defensive cordon restricting the movement of native Senussi rebels. Upon his arrival in April 1940, Lieutenant Colonel Salvatore Castagna threw his energy into transforming the oasis into a formidable redoubt. His garrison of 2,100 troops (1,350 Italian plus Libyan soldiers) was protected by a 2.5-mile perimeter divided into four defensive quadrants, each heavily armed with machine guns and artillery. Although it was fully enclosed by barbed wire, only the northern and eastern sides were protected by anti-tank ditches and minefields – a key weakness to be exploited in a strike from the south.[1]

Australian patrols in the region commenced in early December 1940. ‘We spent three months in and around Giarabub, firstly cutting off communications and then just keeping the blighters in’, Trooper Jim Roberts recalled. ‘We were lucky in lots of ways that we suffered so few casualties, as there were lots of minor scraps before our real effort began.’[2]

Australian cavalry Universal Carriers or Bren Gun Carriers in a desert exercise. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Conditions were exasperating. ‘Pinpricking’ the garrison in the depths of a desert winter, cavalry troops would run their engines for a few minutes each hour to prevent them from freezing. A veteran from the coldest winter on the Somme had ‘never felt cold like this.’ Sandstorms, sometimes lasting a week, cut paint from camouflaged panels. Comic relief, however, was always at hand courtesy of Rome radio’s fanciful bulletins reporting ‘another heavy attack’ beaten off.[3] During a raid on 11 December 1940, Trooper William Tope, a farm labourer from Foster (Vic.), was wounded by a strafing Italian fighter aircraft – inauspiciously making him the first Australian casualty in action on the ground.[4] It was during a similar patrol, a cavalry crewmember recounted to his mother, that ‘our tank [was] shot from under us’.

I came to after a terrible bang and a flash, running like the dickens about 600 yards away from the wreck. The gunner was close behind, but where the other chap got to I do not know yet. We went back to the wreck, but everything was charred, so we just had to start out and steer the best way we could by the sun’s position. It gave us a sinking feeling to see the flat plains stretching out in front of us for miles and miles. We didn’t have any

water or food. What we used to do was to smack at a flock of swallows as they flew past us, about shoulder high, with our belts, suck their blood and then cook them over a fire of cane grass.[5]

Brigadier George Wooten (18th Brigade) assumed command of a composite body – 'Wooten Force' – to assault Giarabub in March 1941. 'I got to work on the job us soon as I could', he explained in a letter to his sister. His diminutive band of 2,219 men included the 6th Australian Cavalry, 2/9th Battalion, D company from 2/10th Battalion, a 25-pounder battery (RHA), 13th Light Field Ambulance and sundry Royal Engineers personnel.[6] Four months of almost continuous monitoring by the 6th Cavalry Regiment, plus aerial reconnaissance, radio intercepts and intelligence gleaned from deserters, enabled a mosaic of the formidable Italian defences to be pieced together. Topography of a 'defender's dream', an intelligence officer assessed, held observations posts and machine gun strongholds 'as if made to order'. Cliffs rising to almost 200 feet held tiers of enemy weapons, making it, an officer later said, 'like storming a modern block of flats.'[7] It was an intimidating assignment.

'We cleaned them up as we went'

Trooper Ernie 'Spud' Blight (6th Division Cavalry) found the trek to Giarabub 'a great experience ... as all the way it is just one big barren desolate waste, without any life at all.'

It was a great sight to see our convoy travelling across [the desert]. At times they used to travel along three or four abreast. After two days' travelling, we stopped about twenty-five or thirty miles from the fort which we were to capture. The next day we went further up and stopped about 10 miles away for the night. On the following day we advanced into the range of the Italian guns and believe me they made it willing for a while. Our forward companies captured a couple of outposts that evening. I thought the actual attack would take place that night, but we lay low for two nights and a day and then at dawn on the second day our attack began.[8]

Eleven casualties were sustained capturing the secondary outposts, mostly minor and chiefly caused by hand grenades.

Australian troops took up position in readiness to attack. Captain Bernard Berry, (2/9th Battalion), known within C Company as 'Berry the

Bastard', undertook a personal reconnaissance: 'I thought I'd like to see what was on the other side so climbed through and meandered on – someone said something to me in Italian so I wandered back again.'[9] Photographing an enemy machine gun position, Berry nonchalantly reassured his men: 'they cannot hit you'. 'No sooner had he spoken the words', a Digger recounted, 'when a bullet went through his camera case. Without battling an eyelid, he just kept on taking snaps.'[10]

Lance Corporal James Mitchell (2/9th Battalion) was more apprehensive, '... a few stray bullets would fly overhead, and I can tell you I felt a bit funny in the legs, just like when you visit a dentist'.[11]

'Awakened from our slumber about one o'clock in the morning' on 21 March, Private Charles Hocking prepared for 'the big hop-over at dawn. We travelled a few miles in trucks, which took us longer than we expected owing to the terrible sandstorms. We jumped off our trucks, took up our positions, and the fun was on'.[12] 'I'll never forget the battle', Private William Franks (2/9th Battalion), a Thursday Island stereotypist, decided.

One could not hear for the heavy artillery and the sand was making things unbearable. The worst part of it was waiting and wanting water, which was very scarce. We reached our starting point at midnight and had to wait till five in the morning, which was the worst part of the battle.[13]

(Franks was discharged permanently unfit for service on 5 August 1942).

Zero hour was 5.15 a.m. Royal Engineers crept forward under moonlight, and an overhead artillery barrage, to blow the perimeter wire using Bangalore torpedoes. 'Gee, they are a brave lot to up and cut the wire right under their noses', James Mitchell commented. 'Then to make matters harder the wops had a gun firing down the wire, and they had to light the fuse with a match. They made two wide holes for us.'[14] A swirling sandstorm, Trooper Jim Roberts recorded, 'one of the worst imaginable', albeit a 'Godsend' on this occasion, was, as Wooten appreciated, 'like the helping hand of Fate, as it always obscured the enemy's observation of movements.'[15] 'The "Ities" had all their guns cunningly concealed', Trooper Roberts affirmed,

with a wonderful field of fire and you can imagine how they would pepper away if we showed ... However, on the eventful day they couldn't see

across the valley for more than a hundred yards or so – thank the Lord – and of course, wouldn't fight much when they found us in close.[16]

A bane to the infantry, Trooper Tom Vincent found visibility 'sometimes restricted to the length of an ordinary bar counter. You didn't know what you were going to strike or be struck with. We alternately ran like Anzacs and clung to Mother Earth like limpets on a rock when the Italians threw everything but the kitchen sink at us.'[17] The choking *ghibli* 'jammed our rifles and blinded us as we crawled towards the Italian machine gun nests', Corporal Charles Latimore (2/9th Battalion) related. 'The sand stung our faces like a whiplash.'[18] Considerable effort was required to keep the machine guns in working order, Lieutenant Russell Forster (2/9th Battalion), a Brisbane barman, explained. 'Each section had to dismantle the Brens under cover of a groundsheet and pass each piece to a section member to clean under whatever cover they had. Then the gun was reassembled, sight unseen under a clean groundsheet.'[19]

The stormy conditions similarly taxed the British gunners. Finding their range under a strong tail wind, they opened fire on the morning of the attack against an even stronger headwind, evidently with incomplete corrections. Hoping to exploit the cloaking storm, Captain Robert Reidy had – fatefully – moved A Company to within 50 metres of the enemy wire, when the barrage erupted. Among those caught in (murderous) covering fire was Corporal James Calvert's platoon (2/9th Battalion).

The noise and the flashes of the bursting shells with which were intermingled the cries of suddenly startled men, and the groans of the wounded, were shockingly frightening. We were so unprepared; it was so unexpected. Again, the baroom-boom of our guns, the thin whine of the approaching shells, a screaming crash and flashes of light, redly orange, blinding in their strange brilliance. Then silence. We were smothered in choking sand, fumes and smoke.[20]

'Our artillery landed right among us'; Lieutenant William 'Bill' Noyes (2/9th Battalion) admitted.[21] Tragically, 11 Australians were killed by friendly fire – out of 23 men killed throughout the entire Giarabub campaign.[22] One of those killed, Captain Reidy, flung Private William Held to the ground once the shelling began. Shielding the 21-year-old with his

body, Reidy, a peacetime farmer and keen rifleman, died without firing a shot.[23] Another 20 men were wounded.

A wave of flashbacks swept over Lance Corporal Mitchell; 'all my life came back to me, and I just lay with my head pressed into the sand and prayed and hoped for the best.' Reorganising and regrouping, the infantry continued to advance. 'We lost a few old faces in that time', Mitchell mourned,

but we went in with the bayonet, and what we did not skittle we chased out ... I got a hell of a fright when we hit the top of the escarpment. I looked over the hill and could see nothing, but after getting on top some 'cow' had a crack at me with heavy Beretta [machine gun] fire ... You should have seen me scoot off the hilltop! I reckon he must have been a rotten shot, or I was lucky.[24]

'We cleaned them up as we went', Denzil Foote relived from his hospital bed. 'About two miles farther on it was like Hell, and here I got in the way of a hand grenade which I stopped with my leg ... but you don't need to worry about me, because I feel O.K.' Foote was also the target of an Italian sniper,

who put some [bullets] too damn close for me ... It was impossible to supply covering fire as we did not locate the enemy. So, we ran the gauntlet, and got through OK. As I ran, I spotted the flashes of the gun, and communicated the information to my troop leader, and we cleaned it up, by drawing fire whilst we worked round, and landed a couple of grenades in on him from above.[25]

Berry, too, was injured. 'Shortly after we crossed the wire, I got a helluva smack on the side, when I picked myself up I decided I'd been hit but couldn't see any holes or anything so, decided it wasn't serious and went on.'[26]

A daring RAF pilot in a Westland Lysander aircraft targeted an enemy machine gun nest, dropping light bombs at low level. He also dropped a note to group of Australians, amid a hail of fire, advising that a dozen surrounded men were the target of Italian artillery, smartly silenced by anti-tank guns turned in their direction.[27]

‘For a while’ the Italians ‘fought well and there was some fierce hand to hand fighting, bayonets being used by the infantry’, a Cavalry report noted. Enemy resistance, however, was waning. Captured troops disclosed how they had not eaten for days. Their beleaguered garrison, they held, would likely fold by lunchtime.[28] It did. ‘The whole business only lasted about six hours and our old flag was flying from the Mosque at mid-day’, Trooper Jim Roberts penned.[29] Inspecting the fort, Australian troops uncovered enough ammunition for Castagna’s force to ‘last for months’. As for the Italian commander, Trooper Tom Vincent observed, he was ‘all “teed up” ready to make a get-a-way but he was grabbed and was rather hostile about it.’ Castagna, who had been slightly wounded by a grenade at his headquarters, exclaimed ‘No surrender! No surrender!’[30]

Roughly 800 Italians and a few Libyans were captured at Giarabub. An accurate number of Italian casualties, however, will never be known, as an RAF officer discovered, with wind-blown sand soon concealing the dead.

They were everywhere. In the dugouts, among the rocks, and lying in the sandy fissures. Already the wind was covering them with a film of fine sand. Some huddled over their guns, others sprawling in grotesque attitudes, dust on their hands and faces making them strangely resemble images in stone. An Italian officer went among them helping with the identification for burial.[31]

A subordinate officer later informed Castagna that he had viewed the burial of 84 Italian dead, 21 of whom were not identified.[32]

Celebrating the fall of Giarabub. Australian soldiers from the 2/9th Infantry Battalion hoist a flag bearing their unit colour patch over the recently captured Italian fort. (Author's collection)

'... probably the only one for hundreds of miles around'

The Australians were hailed as Giarabub's liberators. Corporal Charles Latimore was moved by the civilian population's reception: 'it was the happiest day of their lives to be free again and they said they would pray every day for us. It was a nice message for them to give, don't you think?'[33] Crucially, their mosque, the final resting place of Muslim cleric Sayyid Muhammad ibn Ali as-Senussi, was untouched by the fighting. Otherwise, joked Colonel James Martin (2/9th Battalion), 'it would have been better to leave the Italians in occupation' given how the Arabs were 'a dashed nuisance' in the last war. 'It was a great thrill to all of us to fly our battalion colours from the flagstaff of the fort after the Italian flag had been hauled down', Martin added – 'our first fight and first victory.'[34]

Mastheads back in Australia circulated news of the conquest: 'Long siege ends in capitulation' ran Adelaide's *Chronicle*.[35] Mail relaying more personal accounts arrived later. Private Charles 'Mick' Buxton (2/10th Battalion) shared his 'great experience'.

I was in the Vickers machine gun section picked from our unit to support the infantry. There is little to tell you about it except for shells whistling over our head and a bit of shrapnel flying around. Among the souvenirs I am sending home is a piece of shrapnel that hit the truck near where I was standing, but it did not have my name on it.[36]

* * *

Troops were mustered for a brief funeral service. Reveille followed the Last Post as the dead were laid to rest. Lance Corporal James Mitchell formed part of the honour guard. 'At times I think I hear them talking and it gives me a shock', Mitchell grieved. 'The old company won't be the same now that Captain [Robert] Reidy has gone. He made us. I don't think there was a dry eye when we buried them.'[37]

'It was very sad', Private Gordon McAuliffe (2/9th Battalion) penned with regret. 'Some of the boys had lost a brother, and others a good pal.'[38]

Paying his respects, Garth Suthers (2/9th Battalion) was touched by the presence of an Australian golden wattle, 'probably the only one for hundreds of miles around', planted in the little cemetery plot 'on the western edge of the oasis, under the shadow of the mosque'. High above came the drone of enemy aircraft. The shrill sound of a whistle signalled men to disperse for shelter as four or five German aircraft belatedly appeared, dropping their bombs well wide of the target, each one bursting harmlessly in sand.[39]

* * *

Private Clarence Hansen's (2/9th Battalion) parents received a letter from Private Ronald Matthews, a close friend of their fallen son.

I wish to express my deepest sympathy in your recent, sad bereavement. I was fortunate in counting myself a small link in his long chain of friendships, and may I repeat that it is with sincere and deepest sorrow we see such a splendid man make such a sacrifice for his country. All I can say, and express in words, which, after all, are such futile things, is, 'Well done, Clarrie, your pals will never forget.' I was with the boys when they attacked

Giarabub, and it was a glorious victory for them. I visited the small cemetery before leaving situated in a very pretty oasis, and among a lot of date palm trees; everything seemed so quiet and peaceful, and already the Libyans had begun to attend the graves and had them very nicely done up with stones placed evenly around. The small portion of ground that our cemetery had taken up was nicely cleaned up. These Libyans will always look after the cemetery because of their release from the Italians and because their Mosque was not damaged in the attack.[40]

Two German airmen later surrendered to troops on duty, the badly injured pilot and observer waiting beside their crashed Junkers Ju 88 aircraft. An examination of the wreck revealed that it had been brought down by small arms fire during the earlier fighting when it bombed and machine-gunned 6th Cavalry headquarters. 'Some of the boys sent pieces of parachute-silk home', Jim Roberts wrote. 'It wasn't worth it', an enemy flier fumed.[41]

Returning to Cairo, Sergeant Denzil Foote (6th Division Cavalry Regiment), an Appila (SA) bank clerk, received five days' leave. Having been in the desert for 'four and a half months solid, fighting most of the time, and baths were 'non est' of course', it was a 'well-earned spell'.

I had a glorious time. Three other sergeants and I had dinner together the first night, at Groppi's, starting off at George's Marble bar (incidentally, we hadn't touched a drink since four months!). Well, we were in a delightful mood for dinner, and, at 9.30 p.m., decided to visit a cabaret, so off we went, making a rather noisy entrance, the nicest part being some applause, and a party of people saying: 'You are Australian cavalry? Ah! Bardia, Giarabub, bravo!' It gave us quite a kick. We ordered a table and some champagne and proceeded to enjoy the show. The Arabian dancer, clad in nearly nothing, received tremendous applause from us (you know that wiggly dance – twisting of tummy and twirling of torso). Unfortunately, we got more than we bargained for, because she came over to our table – spotlight 'n' all – and gave us a super show.[42]

(Foote received a shrapnel wound to his thigh on 10 June 1941 and was embarked home as 'medically unfit' and discharged from the AIF on 5 June 1942.)

Meanwhile in Melbourne, the *Weekly Times* jingoistically appraised Australian casualty lists arriving from Libya.

... small though the losses have been compared with the number of men engaged and the importance of the victory they achieved, have brought right home to the people the grimness of war ... Poignant as was the pain on reading of the death or injury of the men we knew, their sacrifice did not depress the people but acted as a spur to their endeavour to win this war. Men promptly stepped into the breach, inspired by the same resolution as had sent their fallen comrades gaily into battle, further attesting to the world the unconquerable spirt of the British race.[43]

Attentively monitoring events in North Africa, General Erwin Rommel, fresh from his 1940 French Campaign victories, wasn't 'surprised that our Allies aren't having things all their own way'.[44] A month later he would be directing an operation in North Africa, sorely testing the Diggers' mettle.

CHAPTER TEN

The Benghazi Handicap – ‘A very exciting race’

Operation *Compass* had destroyed Mussolini’s Italian Tenth Army and eliminated any immediate danger to Egypt. It also brought a flicker of good news at a time when Adolf Hitler’s ground forces appeared invincible. On 12 February 1941, as General Richard O’Connor prepared to continue his drive towards Tripoli, Wavell received news that any ‘major effort must now be to aid Greece and/or Turkey’. To the amazement of senior staff officers in Berlin, Winston Churchill opted to protect Britain’s only remaining continental ally. An expeditionary force of 60,000 men, including Iven Mackay’s Australian 6th Division, would be sent to Greece. While Hitler obsessed about conquering the Soviet Union, he announced from his Bavarian alpine retreat that a (small-scale) armoured ‘blocking force’ would be sent to Libya to assist his ailing ally. Citing ‘reasons of strategy, politics, and psychology’, Germany’s Führer could not afford to let Libya fall to Britain – a predicament that could trigger Mussolini’s demise and derail the Axis partnership. He intended, however, to commit just enough troops to hold Tripoli and stave off any threat to Tripolitania. No major offensive was to be launched.

Hitler's new African army would be led by a decorated First World War veteran and recent hero of the victorious 1940 campaign in France. His name was Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel. Briefed on his new responsibilities, Rommel arrived at Tripoli’s Castel Benito airfield on 12 February to assume command of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* (DAK). Looking hungrily to the east – to Egypt and the Nile – within hours of touching down he was airborne again, scouting the desert terrain that lay

ahead of his coalition Italo-German army. With Wavell's command overextended by events in Greece, and the need to syphon off troops from North Africa and oversee operations in East Africa, the timing was perfect for Rommel to strike. British intelligence in Cairo, however, foresaw no immediate threat from their (audacious) new adversary.

The stylised palm tree with superimposed swastika the symbol of the German *Deutsches Afrikakorps*, became the butt of Australian humour on this truck door. (Author's collection)

Judiciioulsy monitored by Churchill, Wavell shouldered other problems within his own command. The British 2nd Armoured Division (half of which was transferred to Greece) fielded a mix of captured Italian medium tanks, British light tanks and Cruiser tanks beset with mechanical troubles. Weakened by O'Connor's temporary absence (he was recovering in Palestine from a stomach complaint), his newly established Cyrenaica Command was placed under Lieutenant General Philip Neame, a relative newcomer to both armoured and desert warfare. Neame's principal infantry formation, the Australian 9th Division, akin to its sister 6th Division, was composed wholly of volunteers, many of whom had enlisted after the French surrender. Its newly promoted commanding officer, General Leslie Morshead (whom we last saw at Tobruk's surrender) faced the daunting challenge of transforming a mix of partially trained brigades into a cohesive

fighting unit. Originally slated to finish its training as a 'holding force' before participating in any major action, the 'unblooded' division would fire its first shots against battle-hardened German troops. The two sides met on 24 February when German troops ambushed British armoured cars and members of the 16th Australian Anti-Tank Company near El Agheila.

Private Grant Thorpe (2/5th Company AASC), a well-known footballer in country South Australia, vowed never to forget the moment when DAK armoured cars surprised his column.

... some of the cars in our patrol drove on thinking they were AIF, but no(!), one Fritzy car swung around and opened up with a machine gun into our nearest car. I was in the third car and unaware that anything was wrong until I heard the said machine gun. Our sergeant major jumped out and went to ground. The driver hopped behind his utility and stayed there. The other four also took cover ... the lad behind the car (the driver) was not idle, he shot the Hun with his machine gun, swung around and shot another Hun who was firing at him from the kneeling position – two down and two to go. Squinting through the undercarriages, the driver saw No. 3 wriggling towards him. A quick shot and number three was out. That left one more. He preferred to stand up and surrender. It was all over in three minutes, but it seemed years ... three dead, one prisoner, and a slashing Nazi car.[1]

Lieutenant George Millhouse, an English-born railway maintenance worker, survived a close call when a German fighter strafed his position.

... luckily his gun jammed when the line of tracer bullets were about 10 yards off me, otherwise I would have been in trouble. Even if he hadn't hit me, I was hemmed in by ammunition supplies and they would probably have gone up in smoke ... It is not too pleasant being in a raid and the people in England must be marvellous the way they are standing up to it.[2]

Captain Sydney Newcomb (2/15th Battalion), whom we recall leaving Fremantle, arrived at a camp, 'visited daily by the Hun with his planes', outside Agedabia on 8 March 1941. His battalion was transferred to Mersa Brega two days later to relieve elements of the 2/5th and 2/7th Battalions, shortly to leave for Greece.

We were then the most foremost company of the AIF in Libya, a great achievement considering the short time we had been out of Australia. After

a week here, living in a dugout and weathering sandstorms and living under real service conditions, I was sent back to the town of Barce as it was expected that 'D' Company would be taking over the security guard at this place. I spent a week here under most pleasant conditions, but unfortunately just at this time the Hun started his push and we commenced to withdraw to Tobruk. At Mersa Brega we experienced a fair amount of bombing, and our first casualty in the Battalion occurred when one chap [Private Kelvin Croker] stepped on a mine [while on patrol on 12 March] and blew himself up.[3]

With its flanks exposed, the 20th Brigade would have been easy prey had Rommel's armoured columns appeared. On Morshead's insistence, it was transferred to a far more defensible position east of Benghazi, a decision ultimately saving it. Disregarding orders to remain on the defensive, Rommel ordered his 5th Light Division to push ahead and occupy El Agheila. Although Hitler reminded his ambitious general that no reinforcements would be available until after he had overwhelmed Josef Stalin's Red Army, Rommel sensed an opportunity. Casting conventional wisdom to the wind, he split his motorised force into four columns to race across the protruding area of the Cyrenaican coast that Allied soldiers called 'The Bulge'.

'I am sorry to be taking prisoner a man of your age'

The increase in enemy air activity coincided with a British intelligence report on 22 March warning of an 'impending thrust by Germans and Italians'. With his armoured columns fanning out across Cyrenaica, Rommel set his sights on the former Ottoman fort at Mechili, 50 miles south of Derna. Amid the confusion, a German reconnaissance party pulled over a British staff car on the night of 6 April. Inside were Generals Neame and O'Connor. Greatly affected by the loss one of Britain's finest generals, Wavell placed Major General John Lavarack, AIF, his only available senior officer, in charge of Cyrenaica Command.

Originally scheduled for 6 April, the Mechili attack was delayed for two days while Rommel's tanks negotiated the difficult Libyan terrain. A brief battle followed on the morning of 8 April. Lieutenant Frank Sharp (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment), a decorated 46-year-old Gallipoli veteran, and his son Keith, also a gunner, were both captured. In a magnanimous exchange

between victor and vanquished, a German officer apologised to Frank: 'I am sorry to be taking prisoner a man of your age.' In reply, Sharp senior irreverently promised to buy his captor a beer after the Allies had the war won. During the Sharps' later transfer to a German POW camp, both father and son escaped and made their way to Switzerland. 'Pop [Frank] was worldly, had learned all the tricks and knew all the answers', fellow escapee Flight Lieutenant Fred Eggleston (shot down over Libya on 12 December 1941 after colliding with another fighter) reminisced. 'We got to admire his guts and determination in the face of difficult conditions. He and Keith worked as a team and it was a relief to us, when the mountains made the going tough, that Keith was standing by his father.' In a fitting postscript, Frank's former enemy managed to locate him in Australia after the war and buy him the promised beverage.[4]

Bombardier Vincent Cox (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment), formerly a Mudgee (NSW) grazier, was one of those who 'fought their way out ... though a good many of them failed' before making his way to Tobruk.[5] (Cox was killed in action the following year at El Alamein.)

Lance Bombardier Lloyd Moule, right, (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment AIF), a tractor driver from Deepwater (NSW), was taken prisoner at Mechili on 8 April. Escaping from a POW camp after the Allied invasion of southern Italy, he also successfully crossed into Switzerland. Despite being under

Swiss Army control most escapees were essentially unrestricted while awaiting repatriation to their country of origin. (AWM PO2287.005)

‘Boys bleeding at the mouth for the want of water’

The scramble to reach the safety of Tobruk intensified. The 2/15th Battalion arrived at El Regima escarpment on 23 March in a convoy of captured Italian vehicles. Taking up a defensive position, distant explosions in the direction of Benghazi tipped demolitions prior to a general withdrawal. It was here that Corporal John Boyd observed firsthand the cruel legacy of Marshal Rodolfo Graziani’s reign: ‘Senussi men and women with their ears and fingers cut off ’, a ‘form of cruel punishment meted out’ by the Italians during the so-called ‘pacification’ of the country. Graziani had overseen the construction of concentration camps in Libya during the 1920s where thousands of Libyans perished – either hanged, shot or starved to death. Leaving Benghazi, where some 3,000 Italian prisoners were freed through lack of transport, Boyd watched Senussi tribesmen exact a ‘horrible’ revenge.

Italian rifles and ammunition were strewn all around Benghazi when we evacuated, and the Senussi were quick to seize their chance for vengeance. The Italians feared what would happen when we evacuated and implored us to take them with us. But we could not help them; we had barely enough lorries for our own purpose.[6]

Boyd also observed the charity of the Senussi toward British forces when two wounded Australians left behind in Benghazi were safely carried by camel across the desert to Tobruk.

Sergeant Colin Logan, a cabinet maker from Ipswich (Qld), was part of a delaying action at Barce when his unit first sighted the enemy, late on the afternoon of 6 April.

They were in full view of our position, but much too far off to be engaged. It was expected that they would attack at dawn next day, and we anxiously awaited the coming of light. When it did come, not a sign of the enemy could be seen. Their column had moved off during the night, presumably in an endeavour to move round the flank to our rear. We remained in position all day, and at nightfall, all our troops having gone, commenced our withdrawal. The sky was bright with the glow from huge fires, which were consuming dumps of petrol and food as we moved off. I saw my platoon

commander get in the truck behind mine and I have never seen him since. We travelled all night along a road absolutely jammed with vehicles of all descriptions. Of course, no lights could be used, and the strain of driving in the dark was terrific.[7]

All kinds of vehicles clogged the route to Tobruk. Those that broke down were destroyed. Units became mixed; drivers would fall asleep at every halt. Lieutenant William Angus (2/15th Battalion) joined the race east in what was colloquially dubbed the 'Benghazi Handicap'. Driving through the night at a gallop, blacked out, and twice nearly overturning, 'we decided to pull up and camp for an hour. We slept blissfully from 4 a.m. to 5 a.m. and then pushed on.' Cutting across the desert at the same time, German armoured cars captured other men in his platoon, 'a staggering blow, but you soon settle down with new faces.'[8]

Major Charles 'Chas' Barton, a consulting engineer from Mackay (Qld), was also taken prisoner. In a letter to his wife, Lieutenant Geoffrey Morrison (2/15th Battalion) clarified the circumstances of his disappearance.

We left at 8 o'clock at night, just dusk, and Chas and Padre [Charles] Arkell together in their car. I was travelling about half an hour ahead of them by midnight, and I believe that Charles was still in the rear of the convoy. Unfortunately, our truck capsized and the whole convoy passed. We eventually got the truck righted. We were then three hours behind everybody. Well, we travelled on all night and caught the convoy up near dawn and went through the convoy to our prior position ... The intention was to take the back road near Derna and save time. Another convoy got mixed up with us and my car got into the jam and went down the escarpment into Derna, then up the other side and on the Tobruk road. Here we were alone and three enemy tanks appeared on our right from the direction of the back road. I got a gun crew and one of the tanks was soon knocked out and the other two cleared off. We then came on towards Tobruk. Chas failed to appear though, and later a driver reported in saying that he was on the back road with Chas and the Padre and some other vehicles when they were shelled and surrounded by some enemy armoured fighting vehicles.[9]

(Morrison was later killed in action at Tobruk on 21 June 1941.)[10]

Captured by the Germans, 22-year-old Private Cecil Mitchell (2/15th Battalion), a red-haired, blue-eyed labourer from Winton (Qld) was 'handed over to the Italians' and confined to a 'big shed and we were not allowed outside even for a walk.'

Then came the order ... we were going to Tripoli. We were handed four days rations of bully beef and dog biscuits. Then started the fierce, dry trip which was to give us our opinion of the Ities. For the first 48 hours they kept us in trucks; we weren't even allowed to get out to stretch our legs and they would not even give us water to drink. When we called into camp next night there was plenty of water, but if you did not have a watch, a ring or a pin you could not get a drink; this went on the whole trip. By the time we got to Tripoli I saw boys bleeding at the mouth for the want of water. They put us in a room for the night, laying on the bare concrete floor and with no blankets to keep out the terrible cold. Next day they shifted us out to a camp which we all thought was hell. By the time we got there the boys nearly all had dysentery and we had very little to eat. We were put into rooms again without blankets. I saw boys so sick from dysentery that they could not stand on their feet. Of a morning we would have to carry these lads to the RAP and when we did get them there the Ities would tell us they could do nothing for them, so that meant carrying the boys back again. Some of the boys died.

Shipped to Italy, Mitchell was shunted between various POW camps. Revenge was meted out at one site.

... we were having 12 check parades a day. These parades lasted from one hour until they liked to dismiss us. The Ities would not give us our parcels and the rations had slipped back a lot from the previous camp. The reason for this treatment we were told later was the way the papers had the Australian soldiers written up as the lowest people in the world and as people who just went to war for the sport of getting blood.[11]

(Cecil Mitchell successfully escaped across the border into Switzerland 23 September 1943. Officially interned under Swiss Army control, he was released from internment a year later and repatriated to Australia via the Middle East. An army medical board review the next year diagnosed an 'anxiety state' disability, a condition thought to have developed from his time as a POW.)[12]

* * *

Sunday 6 April 1941. A mother in Liverpool (NSW), Maude Edmondson, turns to her diary – her thoughts are with her son serving in the Middle East.

Palm Sunday and I had another dreadful day. I seem to feel there is something going to happen. My only ease seems hard work outside and of course I knit until late at night. The Germans seem to pick Sundays for their special atrocities. Australians as shock troops. I wonder if other people feel like this. Yet I have never been a coward.[13]

* * *

Sydney-born Sergeant Alfred Potter (2/15th Battalion) was captured on 7 April. 'After a pretty stiff nine hours' march', he arrived at Derna. Conditions were miserable, 'our ration being one tin of our M&V [meat and vegetables], which had been burnt and left by our engineers.' Dysentery soon broke out. 'Fed up with it all', Potter decided to 'have a go at getting to Tobruk', a trek on foot across 108 unfamiliar miles of waterless desert.

On Sunday, 30 April, in company with a young Tommy we decided to get out. It was not very difficult, as there were only machine gunners around the camp on fixed lines, so it just meant that if they observed us, we were shot; if not, O.K. We had a big cliff to scale after getting out, and I had selected a *wadi* as I thought to start on. However, it turned out to be a quarry with almost 150 feet of straight fall, and we had a hell of a job to get out of it ... We continued all day until dark without incident and we kept the road in sight as our guide, but as it is impossible to walk in the desert at night we camped again. At daybreak we continued, and at 9 a.m. came to the coast just at the mouth of a *wadi*. These *wadis*, I may add, are about 600 to 700 feet deep, and when you strike four or five in a row it gets a bit monotonous and tiresome. There were plenty of Germans about, but all dead ones owing to the navy playing its little pranks. About 4 p.m. we saw a shepherd and decided to see if he could tell us of any more likely places for water. I was able to understand a little of Arabic and he directed us to an Arab camp in a *wadi* close by. They gave us some Arab bread and some sour milk ...

Meeting up with other Englishmen, Potter continued his break. On several occasions the group awoke to find German soldiers camped uncomfortably close by. Dawn broke one morning to reveal:

three Jerry tents in some sand dunes. Well, we went in a big clump of bushes on a dune, and Jerry pulled up just alongside. Then two of his mates came up from the beach where they had been swimming and decided to have breakfast. We dared not move and the sight of water and coffee was very hard to resist. After a decent breakfast, which I am sure they enjoyed very much, and a smoke, and a yarn, they decided to move off. As soon as was possible away we went again. But it only lasted a couple of hours, when we ran into another swimming party. We had just passed three mines washed upon the beach when we saw a couple of Jerries walking along the beach towards us. We scrambled up the bank and got behind a few camel bushes. Then they walked back and started rifle practice on these mines. We lay in the sun all day watching the beggars swim. That was our second day without water and our tongues were starting to swell. At dark Bill Cave, the Tommie ... decided to see if he could tap a Jerry radiator. There were a few trucks camped on a ridge about a mile away, so we decided to have a go at it. We got within 80 yards when Bill went forward. Both of us had no boots on. Mine had worn out when I got to Gazala. He just got under a truck when I found out that a Jerry emerged from the truck and had seen Bill's foot sticking out. He yelled out to his mate and went to get a gun. Bill went for his life. He ran down the beach, but I later lost sight of him. I walked around all night looking for him but could not find him. At daybreak we again looked without success. I walked beside a camp, but everyone was asleep. Just before sunrise I came round a point and saw a German sentry, but as we had been more than two days without water and I was feeling sick from the bad water at Gazala I knew that it was impossible to spend another day in the sun, but I went on, although it seemed impossible. We walked to the sleeping Jerries and the sentry saw us, although he kept on his beat. We came to a blind quarry when one of us went mad and started to drink salt water. I gave him a good shaking and made him vomit, and he came around all right, but I knew we had to get water somehow. I discovered an Arab in the *wadi*. I could not talk but pointed to my tongue. He gave us some water, some Arab bread, and olive oil, and hid us for the day, as there were a lot of Germans close by. With the aid of the bread and olive oil all the swelling went down by night. When the Arab came back at night he had water for

our bottles and something to eat. He gave me a packet of cigarettes, and I do not think that I ever enjoyed a cigarette more in my life. We pushed on again, keeping close to the beach, and we struck trouble with more *wadis*. One of us had a ruptured tendon in his leg and could hardly walk. The last five miles he had to be carried. The Arab had told me that there was about 10 miles to go and there were eleven *wadis* to cross. I miscounted one and when we came to *Wadi Sabal*, which was our front line, I thought that it was only ten. However, I was right on the wire before I noticed it and could not make out that it was Jerry wire and why it was on the wrong side of the wadi. Still, I could not see anybody about, so around we went and just got to the bottom of a hill of loose sand up the side when someone yelled out 'halt', or that is what it sounded like to me. I halted and looked up in the semi-daylight I could see this cove looking straight down the sights of a Bren gun at me. There was only one man for miles who could speak English, and he heard me sing out. He called to the sentry to hold his fire and said, 'You are an Australian?' I replied, 'Yes.' He then said, 'We are Indians.'Boy, was I pleased![14]

(Commended for his 'evincing qualities of initiative, determination and endurance', Alfred Potter was awarded the British Empire Medal in January 1945: 'in every way an outstanding NCO, and a tireless and enthusiastic member of his unit.')[15]

* * *

With Rommel's threat to Egypt mounting, Churchill pressed Wavell to hold Tobruk, 'a place to be held to the death without thought of retirement.' Following discussions on 6 April in Cairo, Wavell agreed to hold the former Italian bastion for two months – ample time for armoured reinforcements from Egypt to mount a new counter-offensive. Retaining Tobruk would also keep Rommel at bay and frustrate Axis bombers from targeting British warships at Alexandria. The odds were high, as Wavell emphasised to Lavarack: 'There is nothing between you and Cairo'.

'All sorts of rumours are flying'

Weary and determined groups of infantry, artillerymen and tankers trickled into Tobruk, the enemy snapping at their heels. 'After having taken a very

prominent part in the Benghazi Handicap, in which the Hun gave up a very exciting race', Corporal Keith McLean (2/10th Battalion) joined the polyglot garrison.[16] In his first taste of combat, Private Arthur Armstrong (2/13th Battalion) had 'packed 'em'. Writing of his 'first rush', Armstrong considered it 'a miracle' to have come through the Handicap unscathed. Nightfall had saved him. 'I can assure you I'd have sold out for two pence. I uttered a little prayer for darkness to come quickly with enemy infantry only seventy yards away ... It was everyone for himself.'[17]

Sergeant Frank Legg's 2/48th Battalion – the most decorated AIF battalion of the war – arrived in a 'pretty poor state.' Frustration told. 'For eight days and nights we'd been out in the desert on the move (chiefly in the wrong direction) and always on the verge of action but denied the opportunity of having a go.'[18]

Appointed fortress commander of Tobruk, Leslie Morshead instructed his senior officers to stand their ground: 'There'll be no Dunkirk here. If we should have to get out, we shall fight our way out. There is to be no surrender and no retreat.'[19] In a matter of weeks, Morshead, or 'Ming the Merciless' as his men would nickname him, had successfully risen from a brigade commander to a major general, practically a corps commander in charge of Tobruk's garrison of 33,000. His principal formation, the 9th Australian Division (incorporating the 7th Division's 18th Brigade, rushed forward from Alexandria) was joined by machine gunners from the 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, the 51st Field Regiment (Royal Artillery), the 18th Indian Cavalry Regiment (dismounted) and a small armoured force pieced together from remnants of the British 3rd Armoured Brigade and the recently arrived 1st Royal Tank Regiment. Closing fast on Tobruk, Rommel's army comprised the German 5th Light Division, elements of the 15th Panzer Division, the Italian *Trento* and *Brescia* motorised Infantry Divisions, and *Ariete* armoured division. Attack 'with everything we have', the German general pressed a senior commander, 'before Tommy has time to dig in'.[20]

But when and where would Rommel strike? Amidst the confusion, Captain Vernon Northwood found it 'very hard to get a clear picture of what was happening.'[21] Posted to an anti-tank gun on 7 April, Private Frank McGillivray (2/28th Battalion), a British-born farm labourer, 'spent a sleepless night watching for tanks.' The next day was spent unfurling

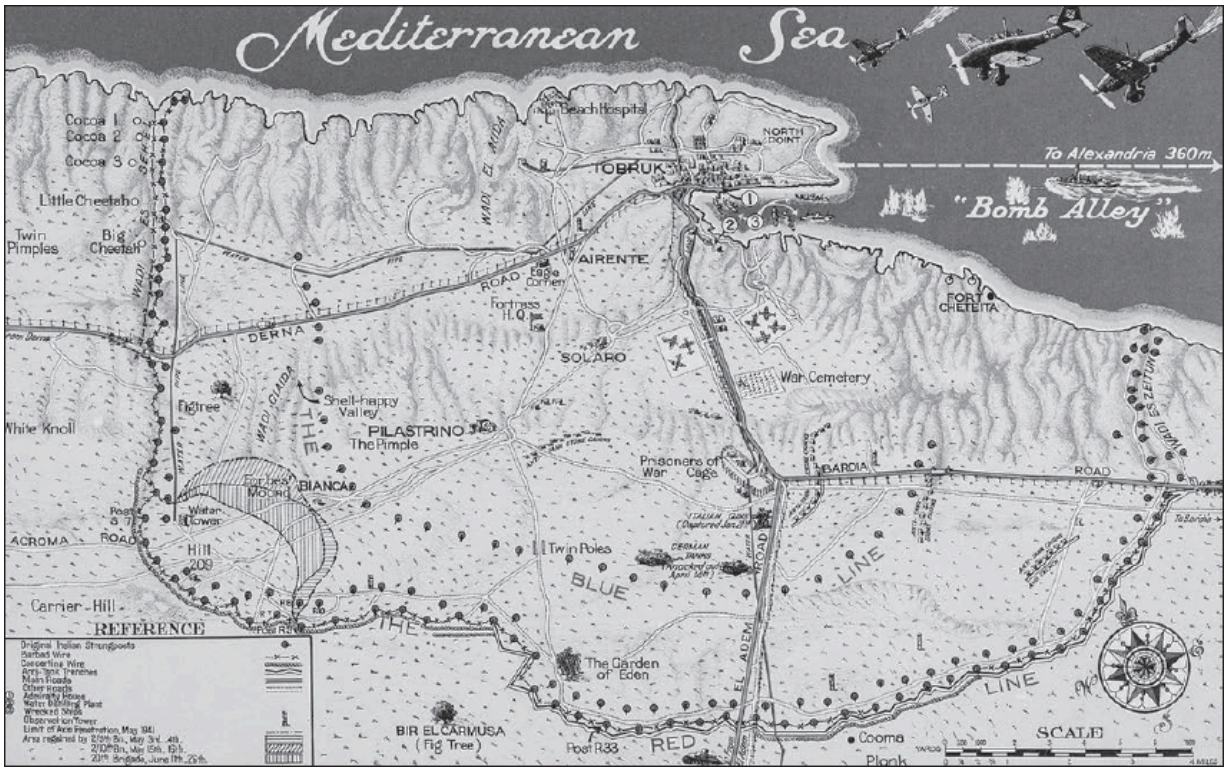
barbed wire and building barricades; ‘all sorts of rumours are flying,’ he penned in his diary, ‘too numerous and fantastic to write.’[22]

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tobruk – ‘They are concentrating on bombing and starving us out but will not succeed in either’

Tobruk was under siege, a form of warfare as old as war itself. Sensing disaster, Robert Menzies panned Whitehall for underestimating German capabilities in Libya, challenging, too, the decision to defend Tobruk.[1] With the former Italian defences weakened from McKay’s recent assault, work began feverishly to restore them. Mines were laid and barbed wire unfurled. Under Lavarack’s direction, three concentric lines of defence were formed. The first – dubbed the Red Line – incorporated the original Italian outer perimeter plus new obstacles and minefields to repel enemy tanks and infantry. A second defensive barrier approximately 4,000 yards inside the perimeter – the Blue Line – would provide defence in depth should Rommel breach the Red Line. A third and final defensive barrier – the Green Line – was constructed in time approximately 2 miles from the harbour. A ‘last resort’ field of defence, it would help shelter the garrison should evacuation by sea become necessary.

Engineers began the grisly chore of clearing the perimeter strongholds. Inscriptions such as ‘Viva il Duce’ and ‘Viva il Imperatore’ adorned underground emplacements – ‘what the Australians added is unprintable’, Private Michael Eisdell (2/17th Battalion) joked.[2] The ‘all-pervading characteristic smell of the long dead, and of dried excreta’ sickened Frank Perversi (2/32nd Battalion).[3]



Tobruk during the 1941 siege. Note the Red and Blue defensive lines, and the Axis-held bulge in the perimeter known as ‘the Salient’.

Cowra-born John Flak (2/4th Field Company) explored the subterranean posts, contested only a month earlier.

The grey concrete walls of a passageway of one [were] heavily sprayed with blackened blood; in the next post, the floor of a passage leading to a bunker was awash with a soup of putrefaction, in all probably human … As I prowled the passages linking one firing point to another, I became aware of a heavy offensive odour … On the bed lay an Italian soldier in an advanced stage of decomposition. He had no face. It appeared to have melted, but a hastily struck second match revealed a seething wall of maggots.[4]

Captain Vernon Northwood occupied a perimeter post originally constructed in 1936.

The whole of this dugout is below ground level. The passages would, I suppose, be about 50 yards long, with bays forming off-shoots and a central control post. All of these posts are modelled on the same pattern. Though they might be good shelters and some protection against shelling and

divebombing, I don't like them. I certainly think 'dugoutitis' (if I may coin such a word) has bred in the Italian a preference for staying below rather than coming up to fight. We don't intend to be caught the same way.[5]

Fleas launched their own campaign, 'the like of which we had never felt before', Northwood recounted, tongue firmly in cheek.

One young lad writing home at this time stated 'you've never seen fleas as big as the ones we've got here – one I caught today had a head as big as a horse. My mate says he heard one of the chaps in another platoon had his leg bitten clean off by one last night, but I don't know if this is true as he's such a flamin' liar' – the sense of humour that was to stand us in such good stead in the long months to follow was showing through.[6]

Establishing itself at Post R13, Jack Barber's platoon (2/17th Battalion) was 'far too tired to be superstitious about the number.'

And, tired as we were, we knew there were supposed to be important duties to perform before we could allow ourselves the luxury of sleep … There was a listening post to be manned and guards to be set, two hours on and four hours off, and we stood-to at dawn, ready if we were attacked, but the first hour of daylight passed without incident.[7]

'Not so long ago', Sydney's *Sun* reminded its readers, 'these men were clerks and tram drivers and bricklayers and roustabouts.'[8] As raw troops they now received a hurried introduction to the fundamentals of combat. Basic weapons training included a lesson on throwing a 'live' hand grenade and grasping its lethal radius. Marksmanship was honed by taking pot shots at tin cans; guidance was given how to disable an enemy tank by using a heavy iron bar to jam its tracks. All available artillery was moved into position. The wait began.

Looking along a wadi towards Tobruk harbour. A former 'Rat' wrote in 1942 how 'Tobruk Fortress consists of an undulating, wadi-cleft desert, about twice the size of Lord Howe Island … all the defences that protect Tobruk are holes scooped out of the sand and embattlements made from rocks and empty ammunition cases filled with sand and stone. Such are the "wonderful" defences of Tobruk'. (Author's collection)

The Easter Battles – 'I can assure you this game is fair dinkum'

The last runners in the Benghazi Handicap crossed the line into Tobruk under cover of a *khamsin* on the night of 9 April. Sergeant Francis 'Smoky' Reeder (2/6th Company, AASC) turned to his diary on 10 April 1941 – describing what he called the 'filthiest' of days.

The day had turned hot and muggy, and by lunchtime we were in the middle of a hell of a sandstorm. It was bloody awful, we could not see a thing six feet away, the cookhouse was about fifty yards away, but I would not risk looking for it, and wandering round out in the desert, perhaps to die of thirst, so I opened a tin of bully and picked it out with my fingers and ate it. It was lousy.[9]

Troops of the 2/28th Battalion spotted an enemy column advancing along the road from Derna in the afternoon. Swift to act, sappers blew a bridge while captured Italian artillery – an unofficial unit christened the 'bush artillery' – was brought to bear. Missing sights, but compensating for

inexact aiming with boyish enthusiasm, the greenhorn gunners peered through gun barrels to gauge the approximate range and direction of their first target, rusting elevation wheels laboriously rotated. ‘Their fire orders are somewhat unorthodox, and the language becomes lurid as the gun teams warm up to their work’, Ian Fitchett reported.[10]

‘Several of us got a big 4-inch gun’, Corporal John Johnson (2/23rd Battalion), a carpenter from Walwa (Vic.) recounted, ‘and put it on our flank.’

We dug him in and camouflaged him; the first shell hit the ground 200 yards away and bounced across the desert like a kangaroo but didn’t explode. We elevated it a bit for the next shot and the shell exploded just near the target. A ‘Pommy’ captain reckoned it was wonderful spirit for men who had never tried one before to tackle such a thing.[11]

(Johnson was later killed in action on 17 May.) As their weapons were prone to dangerous premature detonation, the proficient amateurs would retreat to a safe distance before firing using a lengthy rope lanyard. Much to a British officer’s amusement, the shells found their mark close to the leading German vehicles on this day, forcing a hasty withdrawal. A separate ‘bush’ battery joined with the 25-pounder guns of the 51st Field Regiment in a longer engagement, killing the commanding officer of the 15th Panzer Division, Major General Heinrich von Prittwitz und Gaffron, recently arrived at the front ahead of his division.

Supremely confident, Rommel launched his opening attack the next day, Good Friday, 11 April, using the 700-odd troops of the 8th Machine Gun Battalion and all available armour. As in Poland and France, the infantry would follow the tanks to roll up the defences. Manning a captured Italian anti-tank gun in one of the forward posts, Sergeant Graham Spooner watched as his first tank battle unfolded.

... none came within range for me to have a go, so I sat on the sandbags and had a grandstand seat. About 20 tanks came over a ridge about 2,000 yards away and started to assault one of our posts. The artillery got on to them and knocked out four, and then our tanks, two of them, arrived on the scene. They each got a tank and got knocked over themselves; then the enemy withdrew. On the Monday [14 April], 30 of ‘Jerry’s’ tanks broke through and came almost up to our battalion headquarters. The artillery got on to

them from point blank range. Boy, did they do them up! While all this was going on two Hurricanes and three [Messerschmitt] M.E. 110's were having a go above us. One Hurricane came down in flames, and then his cobber shot down the three M.E.s and crashed himself while trying to make a forced landing. From then on thrills have been few, except for some near misses in shell fire and machine gunning.[12]

In position along Tobruk's southern perimeter, the 2/13th Battalion forced probing German infantry to withdraw using small arms fire.

'It may have been expected that Tobruk's garrison would surrender to a demonstration in force', war correspondent Chester Wilmot conjectured. 'But this garrison was in angry, breathless mood. It turned from its digging and wiring to blast the enemy with fire.'[13] Holding this spirit at heart, Captain Vernon Northwood's men withstood their 'first taste of action'.

My Company was under fire for eight hours (from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.) and at night we were relieved. I had hardly visualised that fire could be so heavy – Jerry certainly put over everything he had. Nevertheless, we suffered no casualties. A Tommy battery was within 150 yards of it, and they were responsible for drawing the fire. They were marvellous and their courage was superb.[14]

Lieutenant Leslie Shea, a Brisbane insurance clerk, and his platoon of South Australian infantry, knocked out several tanks using a tactic specified by Morshead – allowing enemy armour to pass before emerging to engage the trailing infantry.

Out of the early morning gloom we saw four German tanks approaching. We went to earth quickly, but one of the machines went right over the dugout in which we were crouching, and the roof began to crumble. What a feeling! When the tank passed on about 20 yards, we jumped out of the hole, got on the blind side, leapt on top, and chucked petrol bombs [Molotov cocktails] through the observation slits. The Huns pulled up and bundled out, coughing, spluttering, and somewhat roasted. We had four tanks and 20 members of their crews as prisoners. I was so excited that I did not notice that the premature explosion of a bomb on top of the tank had badly burned my arms and hands.[15]

‘Sure enough, along came the tanks’, Arthur Armstrong recounted, after his company commander was warned of approaching British armour.

We all rushed out of the dug-out waving and giving the drivers the Tommy good luck sign, thumbs up. Everything was just lovely until a slight breeze spoilt everything. The wind caught one of the tank’s pennants and blew it back. There was a dirty big swastika. Wasn’t there a rush for the hole.[16]

Further probing and skirmishing preceded the next attack on the night of 13–14 April. This time German tanks penetrated a section of the perimeter held by the 2/17th Battalion before dawn. Their self-assurance was no doubt bolstered by (erroneous) intelligence that the garrison was ‘exhausted’, the ‘artillery was extremely weak’ and the defenders’ ‘morale had become very low.’ By first light the enemy tanks had manoeuvred some three miles inside the fortress. Chester Wilmot continues:

But here the artillery turned on its surprise for them. Smashing fire came down from anti-tank and field guns. Seventeen tanks were knocked out. The rest turned and made off. As they fled back to the gaps in the wire through which they had entered, dust and smoke rolled cross their path as a curtain of fire pursued them.[17]

Gunner Stanley ‘Snow’ Gray (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment), a labourer from Narrabri (NSW), was in the ‘rather decent “blue”’.

A million [*sic*] tanks came over, with infantry behind them. I was pretty safe in a big concrete dugout, but we certainly had the wind up when they came over. When we popped our heads up there was a swarm of them sneaking up. We [got] ‘into’ them with Bren guns and knocked them for a row of skittles. They were about 60 yards away. So you can guess we did not miss many. We shot everything we could see – and some we couldn’t see. This may seem rather bloodthirsty to you; but I can assure you this game is fair dinkum ... I was always a bit sceptical about the way the Aussies were cracked up, but I am satisfied now – there are no better troops in the world. I think the Hun has a most healthy respect for us.[18]

‘The fighting was fierce and bloody, and our reserves were rushed up to meet the attack’, Corporal Malcolm McMahon (2/17th Battalion), a Sydney mail porter, narrated.

The Aussies went into counterattack with the bayonet. Men laughed and joked as they closed in with the enemy, and the bayonets must have been dreadful to see. The enemy felt that dread and cried for mercy as these men that they had chased for 400 miles turned and met the enemy with a determination that sent them hurrying back to their lines. They scrambled back in terror, followed by the tanks, excepting the twisted, burnt and broken masses of steel that remained within our defences.[19]

The Germans 'lost heavily', Gunner David 'Dave' Southgate (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment) later found, with the 'dead on the enemy side ... too many to count.'[20]

Knocked-out enemy armour, a German Panzer III. (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/43)

Private Ronald Grant (2/17th Battalion) was sitting in the trench with Corporal John 'Jack' Edmondson, a grazier born in Wagga Wagga (NSW), 'straining our eyes to see the Huns (it was about 10.30 at night)', when their platoon commander, Lieutenant Frederick Austin 'came up to us and told us to get our rifle and a [hand] grenade each.'

There was an enemy fast digging in on our left where they had broken through our lines ... There was very heavy machine gun fire and plenty of shells, mortars and bombs falling round us and things looked bad. Out we jumped and made our first run to where we lay down facing the enemy post.

The bullets were coming a few inches above our heads as we lay and got final instructions. Pins out of bombs, hearts in our mouths, we raced forward to within fifteen yards of the post. Down! And throw our bombs. Suddenly something went off on my left and lifted me about a foot off the ground. There seemed to be bombs going off everywhere and with a blood curdling shout we tore into them. A machine gun fired at me and missed. Then he emptied a Luger at me, again missing. I got to him and fixed two more in my rush past. Johnny Edmundson had by this time been badly wounded and had after this leaped up and saved Mr Mackell's life. The other boys got about three Huns each and the rest of the enemy ... fled, some screaming and others in tears. We took one prisoner, and the other boys took Johnny back to our post. Mr Mackell sang out from somewhere behind me and I went back to help him. He was wading into the remainder of the Huns with the butt of his rifle. We finished a few more of them off and Mr Mackell said, 'Come on Ron, we'd better get out of this or we'll get shot'. We got out and I suddenly realised I'd been wounded. The RAP man put a dressing on it and they were trying to get poor Johnny fixed up. He kept on asking if I had got out of it alright and seemed more concerned about everyone else than himself. This was characteristic of him, he was a very unselfish chap and would do anything for you ...[21]

Twelve Germans were killed, and one taken prisoner during the brutal skirmish. Edmondson died early the following morning, a week after his mother's fateful premonition. A tinge of apprehension returned. Maude Edmondson awoke early on Anzac Day to make 'rich fruit cakes for Jack ... feeling afraid of something all the while I was working', she heart-wrenchingly diarised. 'Had a couple of brandies to tide me along.' A telegram arrived the next day advising of Jack's death in action.[22] A subsequent letter from Lieutenant-Colonel John Crawford (2/17th Battalion) commended her son's 'extreme gallantry' in combat and posthumous honour.

I submitted a certain recommendation for an Award of a Decoration by the GOC Middle East. My recommendation has now been returned with a suggestion that the circumstances were such as to warrant a posthumous award of the Victoria Cross. I have now submitted such a recommendation and have every hope that it will be granted. If so, it will be the first award to a member of the AIF.[23]

Edmondson's decoration was announced on 1 July 1941. (Awarded the DSO for his leadership at Tobruk, Brigadier John Crawford died on 7 March 1943 in an aircraft crash near Cairns in Queensland.)

* * *

Sergeant Henry 'Harry' Brady (2/17th Battalion), a Commonwealth Public Service defence clerk at Victoria Barracks (NSW), was beyond the perimeter on patrol when he 'saw another patrol a short distance away.' According to a fellow Digger,

He [Brady] moved forward to find out if the troops were members of another of our patrols. When he was close a German officer drew his revolver [*sic*] and shot him dead. His cobbers went absolutely berserk and went for the Huns with bomb and bayonet. The enemy patrol was rather large, but few prisoners were taken. No member of the patrol got away.[24]

Manchester-born Warrant Officer Alfred Wilson (2/28th Battalion) related the story of a captured German officer who,

intended to take up with the Geneva Conference or some such body the cruel way in which the Australian soldiers use the bayonet. If it was not so serious it would be humorous. At the best it is hardly a parlour game.[25]

(Mentioned in despatches for 'gallant and distinguished services' in the Middle East, Wilson was killed in action on 10 September 1941.)

Overhead, outnumbered RAF Hurricane fighters valiantly contested the skies. Writing from 'somewhere in North Africa' on 16 April, Lieutenant William Jenkins (2/48th Battalion) was 'now in action and ... getting used to being bombed and machine-gunned from the air.'

Not a very pleasant sensation I must admit, but I have a little hole dug which I hop into when it all starts. Have also been shelled by artillery and everything else that goes with war, but so far have been lucky.[26]

'We've seen a few dog fights', a Digger thought back, having weathered a German pilot's fury.

One of our planes dived practically into the ground with a Messerschmitt on his tail in one scrap. Shots from the plane landed in front of us, just missing one of our men. Our plane flattened out at about twenty feet above the

ground and flew right in front of us. He eluded the Messerschmitt, which then turned its guns on us – a trying few moments indeed![27]

Sergeant Harold Davey (2/10th Battalion), an Adelaide land broker, was 'ringside' to the demise of an enemy fighter crippled by anti-aircraft fire.

It simply doubled up, side-slipped and crashed 'midst a cloud of black smoke. You doubtless heard our cheering ... The pilot was incinerated. As a grisly souvenir, I posted a piece of the pilot's 'chute home. Jerry's 'chutes are certainly made of first grade silk. I guess the ladies of Clare cannot buy pyjamas of the same quality.[28]

'He's down', men shouted as a 40-mm shell from a Bofors anti-aircraft gun caught a low flying Messerschmidt 110 fighter. Struggling to climb, the pilot 'flattened out in a long glide with engines coughing crazily'. With a 'terrific force, the plane ploughed into a *wadi*.'

A huge pall of smoke hung over the scene ... from everywhere troops were running to the spot. There was practically nothing of the plane – just a twisted metal – the engines had been hurled far from the point of impact. All that that could be seen of the German occupants were two pitiful red bundles of flesh.

'War', Vernon Northwood closed. [29] 'It was horrible', Signaller Frederick Heath (2/28th Battalion, a railway porter from Guildford (WA) reiterated,

and just as the crowd cheers with crazy excitement as two good horses finished neck and neck in some classic race at home, so did we, when that splendid plane came to such a terrible end! The human is a strange creature, isn't he?[30]

Inspecting a German Junkers Ju 87 *Sturzkampfflugzeug* (‘dive bomber’) or Stuka wreck. Note the souvenired tail swastika. (State Library of South Australia PRG 691/12/14)

‘I might have done the same thing myself, probably’

In the aftermath of the Easter Monday assault, Private Morgan Munckton (2/15th Battalion), a Miles (Qld) labourer, was part of a 36-man group sent beyond the perimeter to capture enemy tank crews separated from their vehicles.

We came across a party of Germans hiding behind a stone barricade. We didn’t know they were there until they opened fire on us and the bullets started whistling around. It was funny the way it happened. Some of our chaps were inspecting a tank when bullets began to ‘ping’ on the sides of it like a lot of bees buzzing. It was a few seconds before we realised someone was shooting at us. Then we made a dash across open ground to get under cover, and unexpectedly landed in the same trench as the enemy. However, they didn’t hit any of our fellows, and, after a couple of hours banging away at each other, we took 104 prisoners.[31]

Jack Barber was assigned to a burial detail during a brief respite in the fighting. Shocked by the scene of earlier carnage, he recalled:

… picking up the bodies that were spread over a large area … This wasn’t a pleasant task, as we recognised many of the men we were loading into the vehicle … It was also unpleasant bringing in the German dead. Apart from

the uniforms they looked just like us. A lot of them had been killed by small arms fire, but the RHA accounted for quite a number.[32]

'The British artillery must not be forgotten,' Lieutenant James Potter stressed in a letter to his mother, the guns instrumental in repulsing enemy attacks.

Had it not been for them, no other unit would be here to give such a wonderful show ... And in years to come, should any mention be made of this siege, all ranks alike will give a silent prayer ... Good shooting, lads.[33]

Writing to his wife at Hornsby Heights (NSW), a sergeant recounted the grim realities of war, describing:

Hun tanks, which we chop up like cheese. I inspected one this morning and a slaughterhouse was clean in comparison. Bits and pieces everywhere. So we are not perturbed about things at all.[34]

Bewildered by the reverse, an entry in a German officer's diary read: 'What we experienced in Poland and the Western Front was only a promenade compared to this.'[35] Rommel later admitted his attempts to 'penetrate into the British positions had failed. It was now finally clear that there was no hope of doing anything against the defences with the forces we had … I decided to break off the attack until the arrival of more troops.'[36] While Axis units licked their wounds beyond the wire, morale within the garrison soared. Leslie Morshead's men had withstood their first test.

Lieutenant Colin Logan (20th Brigade), an Ipswich furniture manufacturer, was convinced 'that Hitler has bitten off more than he can chew by sending his troops to North Africa.'[37] Private Thomas Johnson (2/28th Battalion) similarly assured his mother, 'We may be surrounded but we're a hell of a long way from being demoralised or defeated.'[38]

In his summary of the Easter engagement, Father Owen Steele, former Yeronga (Qld) parish priest, outlined how:

German losses yesterday were greater than the AIF sustained at the capture of Tobruk [in January] and at the end of the day they had achieved nothing. One of the captured young Germans, who spoke English quite well, said he was surprised at the fighting qualities of the Australians.

‘But,’ added Steele, ‘we told him that he had met only the novices, which was quite true, as a lot of the fighting troops had left Australia only about three months before’.[39]

Thrown into the fray after Rommel’s botched initial attacks, the Italians appeared almost ‘glad’ to become prisoners. Sapper Frank O’Donnell (whom we met sailing in convoy along the Suez Canal) observed the Germans in a different light,

intensely embittered against the British. They apparently have had propaganda drummed into them for years on end. Germans laugh at the idea of Hitler ever being beaten or at the idea of the British winning.

O’Donnell was later invalided home to Junee (NSW) after losing his left eye to a hand grenade tossed by a prisoner 15 yards away. It struck him on the shin, exploding.

At the time I was guarding about seventy prisoners in the desert. The Italians, who had come out of the hills were as quiet as lambs. Although I did not see it, an officer told me later that one of them walked away and started fossicking in the sand. From a box which had been covered over with sand, he picked out a hand grenade, and threw it at me. Had it been a clear day I might have seen the grenade coming and been able to ward it off with a bayonet. I don’t blame the prisoner; I might have done the same thing myself, probably.[40]

Incensed, one of O’Donnell’s mates pulled a revolver and shot the Italian, one of many men O’Donnell saw die for similar treachery.

An Australian intelligence officer chats with a German prisoner inside a POW cage. (AWM 040579)

Localised strikes continued, but there were signs of discord within Rommel's Axis army. Italian troops made a desultory push to breach a sector of the western perimeter. Retiring at speed under a British bombardment, disapproving German gunners landed a few 'spiteful' rounds in their midst. A relative calm descended on Tobruk. But for how long? An Australian soldier confided in his diary: 'Today is a miserable day. It is raining and cold as blazes ... the enemy have been very quiet all day, which is a relief, but it makes one a bit suspicious when he is quiet.'[41]

'Make no-man's land our land'

From the outset of the siege, Morshead was determined to 'make no-man's land our land'. His experience in leading the 33rd Battalion on the Western Front during the First World War would serve the garrison well. Responding to a journalist writing 'Tobruk can take it', Morshead shot back: 'We're not here to take it. We're here to give it.'[42] 'The enemy's positions were deeply penetrated night after night', he later lectured.

Considerable casualties were inflicted, mines were either disarmed or shifted onto enemy tracks, or brought back for our own use and above all, the enemy kept in a constant state of fear and trepidation, so that he was awake by night and slept by day.[43]

Aggressive patrolling became a key feature of Tobruk's bull-headed resistance. Nocturnal fighting patrols often covered thousands of gruelling yards on foot before reaching enemy positions. These were times when the 'Tobruk rats show their fangs', war correspondent Guy Harriot filed.

Patrols, wearing sandshoes, all encumbering equipment left behind creep silently through our wire and into the enemy lines. To the watcher they seem to melt into the ground and disappear. It is quiet with the oppressive stillness of the desert night, and a young moon casts queer unreal shadows, and things seem to move where no things are ... So persistent, so successful and so deadly have been our patrols that the enemy has been reduced to a state of panicky nervousness ... which leads him to put down artillery and mortar barrages on very slight provocation, and often, indeed, on no provocation at all.[44]

Results were often impressive. A raid on 22 April by members of by 2/48th Battalion, supported by three Matilda tanks, surprised an Italian formation from the rear. Unnerving the enemy, the Australians returned with 16 Italian officers and 354 other ranks plus weapons and vehicles. During July, it was estimated that Australian patrols killed 180 enemy troops and wounded at least 230 while taking 11 prisoners.[45] Even Rommel complimented the patrollers' truculence, praising them as 'the best of soldiers, with their cold-blooded ability to carry out reconnaissance raids night after night.'[46]

In 'harassing the enemy lines and doing much damage in these clashes', Private Donald Keyes wrote of 'Jerry always filling second place'.[47] Though patrols might return without having seen or heard enemy movement, casualties amongst those surreptitiously sneaking beyond the wire were inevitable. Private Archie Campbell (2/15th Battalion), a Queensland Jackeroo, led a 12-man patrol in late April. Aside from the two Bren gunners, each man carried a rifle with bayonet and a cloth bandolier containing 50 rounds, with ten in the magazine and one 'up the spout'.

The object was to secure a [German] prisoner and go till we struck trouble. Yours truly was chief scout out in front ... We were supposed to encounter the enemy at 1,600 yards, but did not contact him till 3200 yards, and then we got right in amongst their trenches. We thought there were only about six of them there at the outside, but when we charged with fixed bayonets and a flare went up there were about forty. We got away with one prisoner and three of us wounded, one of whom died next day. We both came from the same post and it took six of us to carry him back A lot of things that happened are best forgotten, if possible ... The only thing that stuck to us, although we were outnumbered, was the old element of surprise, and hand grenades, etc. Once we got in amongst them it was touch-and-go for a while.[48]

(Wounded at El Alamein in September 1942, Campbell was killed in action east of Singapore on 4 November 1944 during the Z Special Unit raid on Japanese shipping – Operation *Rimau*.)

Private Eric Foggo, a Ceduna (SA) farm hand, was one of 50 men who volunteered on 29 April to venture into no-man's land and capture an enemy post. 'Of course, you can guess how pleased I was to have a go at them', he afterwards jotted in correspondence home.

We set out at eleven o'clock that night, and by the time we contacted them it was about four in the morning, but what with rifles, machine guns, and mortars, they got too hot for us so we got the order to retire. It was just then that I stopped my bit of shrapnel [reported as 'GSW chest wall'], and as far as I know it came from a mortar bomb. Anyway, I retired all right, and at no slow a speed! They whizzed a few slugs at us as we were leaving but didn't hit anyone. I got back to our post at about half past five, and, of course, they took me straight to the hospital in Tobruk.[49]

'I lost another chap last night', Lieutenant Harold Salisbury (2/9th Battalion) regretfully wrote after leading a small patrol.

Not badly hurt, bullet through the foot. Very nearly got 'done up' last night while out on patrol. Managed to get within 100 yards of Fritz's wire when the dirty dog sent up a flare and we were spotted. Impossible to describe my feelings. He bunged over a mortar and threw everything at us. Only thing that saved us was that we were so close. Minimum range of a mortar is 200

yards. We were held down for over half an hour, expecting to stop a bullet any old time. Then I decided it was time to try to make a move. I was a bit scared he might send out a fighting patrol to 'do us up.' I only had two chaps with me. Rather a delicate situation when you are spotted out in no-man's land. It's suicide to attempt to retreat. Either keep getting closer or move across his front until you think you are out of sight from the section that spotted you. Flares are going up all the time and you have to crawl on your stomach ready to lie doggo as soon as a flare is fired. Anyway, after crawling for approximately 200 yards we dared to get up. Finally, after diving to Mother Earth numerous times because of flares, and having spent three hours in no-man's land, we arrived back safely. That happens every night. Great life, eh![50]

(Harold Salisbury was later killed on 4 September 1942 in New Guinea.)

Sergeant Noel 'Jack' Smith (2/17th Battalion), a single dairy farmer from Kiama (NSW), similarly led a patrol beyond the wire '1400 yards to an outpost near the German lines.' Soon pinned down, it 'turned out to be one of the mad things we Australians do in wartime.'

Well, it was the worst 24 hours I ever put in. We were out there with a machine gun post only 600 yards away, which had never been reported before, and they kept firing on us all day. They put about 100 shells, inside and outside the wire round our post, also mortar bombs. ... every one of us was glad when we got orders to get out of the post at two in the morning. They talk about mountains back home, but to get to this post we had to cross a *wadi* which was like trying to get down from Bulli Lookout [in Maddens Plains, NSW]. Two men from another unit fell down here and were killed, and getting up the other side, you had to hang on with your teeth, but we got across alright. We were armed with three Tommy guns, rifle and bayonet, and two hand grenades per man, and for each Tommy gun we had 130 rounds and 65 for the rifles. We moved out through our post at 11 p.m. We had covered 2,400 yards when looking through the glasses I noticed a man standing up about 800 yards away from us near the minefield. By the way it was full moon. We went to ground, and this chap was joined by 26 others, and the whole lot moved out along the field and started digging. We decided to have a go at them, so on the order to move forward, we spread out until we were about ten yards apart. We had only moved about 300 yards, when to our horror, over fifty Germans and Italians

joined the first lot, and proceeded to start work on the minefield, putting in new booby-traps and anti-tank mines. We went to ground and followed them for just on 2,500 yards. We decided to move in as quickly as we could, then let the mob have all we could throw at them, and then clear off. We went forward 500 yards and at this stage the enemy were only 75 to 100 yards off us, and in a large mob altogether. We went to ground here behind a slight rise, and by this time it was that bright you could sight them on the Tommy guns. On the word to fire, we gave them everything we had. You could see the enemy falling in their tracks, but we did not have it all our own way. The Germans in the party moved three quick-firing machine guns into position in a 'V' shape around us, and with about 20 of their Tommy guns made us wish we were back in our concrete post. After their first burst, I could see that they meant to move right around us in a circle and wipe us out, so I gave the order to clear out, and believe me, none of us will forget those next 400 to 500 yards we had to cover to get away from their fire, and how we ran through it and got away alive beats me. Bill was hit on the finger by a bullet that hit a stone and ricocheted off, but we won through, and about 1,500 yards back from where it happened, we joined together and moved back to our lines to find the Battalion standing to in case of an attack by the enemy. When we started to talk over what we had taken on, eighty to four, and we inflicted heavy casualties on them, we realised what fools we had been, but everything went off OK and we are fit to go out again tomorrow night.[51]

(Lieutenant Noel 'Jack' Smith died on 9 June 1945 during the invasion of Bougainville.)

Private Edward 'Ted' Boxer, whom we met in the introduction, was among a company of 90 men who charged an enemy position with fixed bayonets on 22 April. Throwing 'up the sponge', 350 German prisoners were taken. Hit in the leg by an anti-tank shell during the advance, Boxer's leg was sheared off below the knee.

He did not feel the injury in the excitement. His first reaction to what happened, was one of cold rage. Picking up his boot lying some yards away with the foot still in it, he waved it viciously at the enemy and tried to carry on, but soon had to pull out. He partly stopped the bleeding by tying two scarves tightly around his leg and crawled to a nearby gully.

Privates Harold Parker and Desmond Taylor later rescued Boxer under artillery fire in a light truck. ‘Of partly Aboriginal blood, and a fine stamp of [a] soldier with well-built physique’, Boxer (who was not legally entitled to enlist in the AIF) was invalided back to Australia, but with a yearning ‘to go back again to help his mates.’[52]

As so often happens in war, fortune could favour the brave. Private Maurice Jones (2/10th Battalion), a single labourer from Kalangadoo (SA), was reported as ‘missing in action’. His mother was notified that her son was wounded in action, and a letter from Maurice explained all.

Just a few lines, hoping you are well, as this leaves me in a serious condition at present. I have been wounded by an anti-tank rifle bullet high up through my thigh, and my leg is broken in two places. But do not worry over me, because I feel quite OK otherwise. I was taken prisoner for about ten minutes. The Huns had just finished giving me a drink of water in their trench, when our shells started landing into the trench. So, I crawled on the good leg and my hands, and, making a break for it, crawled through bullets and shrapnel for 300 yards. Next day I crawled all day, pulling my wounded leg along with me. I myself don’t know how the Hell I ever went through it all. I had no water for three days and nothing to eat. But while I could see the Aussie lads not far away, I kept my spirits up, determined to get to them sooner than be in the hands of the Huns for the rest of the war. So I stuck to it. Some of Harry’s lot picked me up, about 30 yards out, and carried me to the RAP. Their CO, after I had told him that I’d crawled 600 yards on my tummy for three days without water or food said I was a real Briton. I said ‘Briton be dammed. I’m an Aussie.’ A couple of the lads that were in the hop over there were to see me today and they were very thrilled to see me again.[53]

(Assessed as ‘permanently unfit for service’ by a medical board, Jones was embarked from the Middle East, later classified as ‘40 percent unfit for employment in civil life, decreasing.’)

Bloody havoc befell a patrol that Private Alfred Allard (2/10th Battalion), a Perth signwriter, was sent out on ‘to have a slap at three of Jerry’s posts one night.’ Unsuccessful and forced to withdraw, Allard killed time in a shell hole for several hours, hoping for cloud to obscure a brilliant moon. Machine gun fire rang out.

I started to crawl back to headquarters on my belly. There was plenty of Jerry 6-inch mortars and shells flying about and 'Laughing Death' was at his best or worst. Suddenly I came across a guy with a leg off, and he's bleeding something terrible. He couldn't have been any more than 18 or 19 years old and there were some silent tears running down his face as I pulled out my field dressing to bandage him up to stop him from bleeding to death. Before I'd gone very far with me work, I heard a stream of 'Laughing Death' getting louder and closer. Ha ha-ha-ha. It crept nearer and nearer. I didn't know whether to run or to scream or to – well, you wouldn't understand how I felt even if I told you. Anyhow, I flattened out on to Mother Earth and started biting and chewing and scratching dust and dirt. And I think I was even praying. Then I felt this kid I'd been bandaging give a quiver. 'Laughing Death' passed on and the kid just looked at me and smiled with blood running from his mouth and tears from his eyes and said: 'Did you hear them when they hit me mate?' He got no less than six messengers of hate from that 'Laughing Death' right across his chest. A few seconds later he gave his last quiver on this earth.[54]

* * *

Australian troops quickly developed a healthy respect for the Indian soldiers in the garrison (and later the Czechs and Poles). 'There's no doubt about the value of Indians on patrol work', former champion footballer Corporal Charles 'Lulla' Daly reckoned, praising a marksman among their ranks.

One night at Tobruk a sniper picked one of our men off as he came from his dugout. A comrade went to get him and suffered the same fate. Two others were shot before an Indian volunteered to fix the sniper. He fixed him. The Indians are just wraiths in the night when they go out on patrol.[55]

(Daly was later evacuated with a gunshot wound to his left arm and discharged as 'medically unfit' on 22 June 1942.)

Nerves understandably shattered under unremitting strain. Men like Leslie Watkins, for whom 'night patrols ... gave time to reflect on a war that had already seen too many of his 2/13th Battalion mates killed'.[56] A soldier whose patrol had been ambushed three weeks prior despairingly penned:

The corporal of our squad … has not yet straightened up but gets about with a perpetual stoop and anxious glances enemywards; it jolted his nerve badly. Another member of the squad has been in hospital, and I admit I felt jittery for a couple of days.[57]

(Watkins was later part of 'Z' Special Unit before being discharged in 1945 as 'medically unfit for further military service' with an 'anxiety state.')

Exposure to war could also, paradoxically, bring out the best in a soldier. As one Australian officer commented:

It's surprising how action changes many men; my worst and most troublesome man in camp life and the only man I've ever had under arrest is now one of my best and will do anything for me at all. Others we thought were good men, crack up quickly; but fortunately, very few.[58]

'The Salient'

News of Tobruk's heroic stand reverberated around the world. Harold Denny, writing for the *New York Times*, surmised: 'it is difficult to see how the Axis can advance further while the British hold Tobruk'.[59] Rommel, consequently, earned the ire of Hitler's senior officers in Berlin. General Franz Halder, Chief of the General Staff, was particularly unimpressed, logging in a damning war diary entry (23 April): 'I have a feeling that things are in a mess' and censuring Rommel as a 'soldier gone stark mad'.[60] Sent as an emissary of the German Army High Command, General Friedrich Paulus arrived at Rommel's headquarters on 27 April. Scrutinising the situation, he cancelled an attack scheduled for 30 April, only to sanction it two days later after Rommel deviously declared that sufficient ammunition was on hand.

Within Tobruk, Private Frank McGillivray took solace in the knowledge that the 'defences are all well manned and so far, all German attempts to break through have been repulsed.'[61]

Relieved, the 2/48th Battalion, which had tenaciously held its 5-mile western perimeter front (the Australian Army taught that one battalion in open country with good 'machine gun slopes' could hope to successfully defend 2,000 yards) was replaced by the 2/24th Battalion. It was here that Rommel would direct his final assault against the fortress in 1941, on 30

April. The screaming sirens from a wave of Stuka dive-bombers heralded the start, around 7.15 p.m., just as the sun slipped below the horizon. In a replay of events earlier in the month, ill-prepared German troops were again thrust directly into battle, without adequate rest or rations. To maintain surprise, Rommel barred any reconnaissance, leaving newly arrived troops to advance against unknown defensive positions across unfamiliar terrain.

'Our battalion moved into position and four hours later the Germans and Italians launched their biggest attack', Sergeant Lindsay Bailey (2/24th Battalion) recalled.

They attacked us with great tanks, a vastly superior force of men and the most awe-inspiring weapons – flame throwers. Our men stood to their guns through eight hours of hell, never flinching, until at last the enemy began to give ground ... Then in the next few hours came the worst job, the burying of our dead comrades. Every one of them died with a gun in their hands and a smile on their face. No tribute would be great enough to pay to these lads who went through twelve months of training to be a soldier, only to be killed in their first battle.[62]

'When two of our chaps were killed we had to bury them in a [anti] tank ditch', a Victorian sapper lamented, since 'snipers made it impossible to get them back.'[63]

The men of the 2/24th Battalion, the 'Wangarattas', appeared to another sapper like 'bronzed statues in the glare of battle. Sweat poured down their faces and clouds of cordite blackened their uniforms.'[64]

Three Queenslanders crept up on a trio of German light tanks, scaling the rear decks. A 'desperate tug-of-war' broke out before hand grenades were dropped inside, knocking out two vehicles.[65] While the garrison's resistance was 'stubborn as ever', Morshead had no clear understanding of the enemy's headway. Patrols sent out to clarify the situation were hampered by a veil of thick mist that had descended upon the battlefield. The German advance was eventually checked on the northern face of Hill 209 (or Ras el Medauuar), the highest point within the fortress, having seized – at considerable cost – 15 perimeter posts. 'Their success', a Digger explained, 'gave them a three-cornered area ... known as the Salient.'[66]

Morshead counterattacked with the 2/48th Battalion the following night, though with only modest gains and 134 casualties suffered under intense

fire. In the slugging match that followed, only 1,000 yards of territory were retaken by the end of June. Stretched to capacity, Tobruk was simply not strong enough to break out on its own until relieved by outside forces. A grinding battle of attrition followed, reminiscent of the stalemate along the Western Front during the First World War. The 'Verdun of the Desert' was the phrase Andre Glarner, a French war correspondent, used to describe the fortress in a broadcast to Europe via the BBC foreign service. Glarner, who captained the French Olympic team at Stockholm in 1912, relayed a series of anecdotes concerning Tobruk's Australian defenders. One was of a captured German officer who chided his interrogating English officer: 'You cannot win this war. God is with us.' 'That's all right', the Englishman promptly replied. 'We have the Australians.'[67]

'Watching with Pride', Menzies applauded the garrison: 'Against odds you are, I believe, putting up a fight which will live in history'.[68] 'Blitz tactics beaten at Tobruk', Brisbane's *Courier Mail* headlined.[69]

Ruminating on this latest reverse, Rommel acknowledged: 'We were not strong enough to mount the large-scale attack necessary to take the fortress ... It was now impossible to contemplate anything more for the present than isolated operations against individual strong points.'[70] Axis troops were to reinforce their toehold on Tobruk and continue on the defensive for the remainder of the siege, their main armoured forces needed elsewhere to counter British forces striking from Egypt.

Australian infantry manning 'Salient' section positions subsisted in trenches barely deep enough to crawl along during daylight hours, all the while under enemy observation. Enemy snipers achieved 'astounding results', with several NCOs in one battalion shot through the head. Plagued by fleas and flies, sleep during the day was fitful at best. Camel ticks burrowing into skin required medical intervention, with desert sores and tinea adding to the troops' general discomfort. Work on improving the positions and occupying forward listening posts was done at night, though troops quickly lost stamina. Water was precious, with dry rations supplemented by one hot meal per day, brought up to the posts under cover of darkness.

Private Richard Makim (2/13th Battalion), a station hand from Inverell (NSW), took up a front-line position – a trench 'between 80 and 100 yards from the Huns'.

They are not much better than the 'Ities'; it's really only their equipment and numbers that see them through, and their cunning. They are afraid of the Aussie. Six of our chaps got in amongst about 40 of them on a fighting patrol the other night and 'bowled' about 14 of them with a machine-gun and bayonets, and the rest took to their heels. They have the breeze up about the bayonets.[71]

Enemy mementos, as we have seen, were always prized. 'I got a beautiful little Italian .38 auto revolver as a souvenir the other night and Tom [Haley] landed a pair of field glasses and a watch.'[72]

One of the most treasured items fell from the sky – propaganda leaflets urging the garrison to surrender, much to the contempt and amusement of troops, who quickly pocketed them to send home. 'All we have to do is go out holding a white flag', Sergeant Robert 'Bob' McGhee (2/48th Battalion) bantered. 'Can you visualise our boys turning it up like that? The boys would welcome a chance to bash their way out.'[73] The Nazi handbills quickly soared in monetary value, as Major John Devine observed, selling 'for £2 each and when last quoted were still rising ... It was even seriously suggested that the enemy be asked to speed up production and drop more.'[74] 'Well, we haven't stopped laughing yet', Sapper William Heath (2/4th Field Park Company) smiled.[75] Taken by the enemy ploy, one Digger drafted a more tempting appeal.

AUSSIES! We have been trying to get you out of your rat-holes for the past three months and are getting a bit fed up with it. Everyone [*sic*] of your chaps we get costs us ten, and it's getting a bit thick. Come out and give yourselves up. The German beer is the best in the world, and we have millions of gallons here. If you can't stand our sauerkraut, we'll give you steak and eggs anytime you want them. Our prison camp is the most luxurious in the world, with two-up schools every night, coursing every Wednesday, trots on Monday afternoons, and gee-gees every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. It's all yours if you PLEASE, PLEASE LET US TAKE TOBRUK![76]

Lieutenant Frank Broadhurst, acting officer in charge of 2/4th Field Park Company, officially informed his men in late June that it was 'permissible to enclose German propaganda leaflets in letters.'[77]

AUSSIES
AFTER CRETE DISASTER ANZAC TROOPS ARE NOW BEING RUTHLESSLY SACRIFICED BY ENGLAND IN TOBRUCH AND SYRIA.
TURKEY HAS CONCLUDED PACT OF FRIENDSHIP WITH GERMANY. ENGLAND WILL SHORTLY BE DRIVEN OUT OF THE MEDITERRANEAN. OFFENSIVE FROM EGYPT TO RELIEVE YOU TOTALLY SMASHED.
YOU CANNOT ESCAPE.
OUR DIVE BOMBERS ARE WAITING TO SINK YOUR TRANSPORTS. THINK OF YOUR FUTURE AND YOUR PEOPLE AT HOME.
COME FORWARD – SHOW WHITE FLAGS AND YOU WILL BE OUT OF DANGER !
SURRENDER !

Enemy surrender leaflet, a propaganda piece that quickly became a prized souvenir among the 'Rats' with demand outstripping supply. (Author's collection)

* * *

Correspondence from home detailing events in eastern Europe came as a surprise to Private Kenneth Jolliffe – the 'Russians were with us', he exclaimed.[78] On 22 June 1941, three-quarters of the German army, a total of 153 divisions, plus satellite troops from Hungary, Romania, Finland, Croatia and pro-Nazi Slovakia, surged across the Soviet frontier. Mussolini also offered his support. Within weeks the largest military operation in history had pushed to within 200 miles of the Russian capital. Eleven days prior, Hitler drafted Directive No. 32, bullishly outlining operations to commence after the Soviet surrender: 'It is important that Tobruk should be

eliminated, and conditions thereby established for the continuation of the German–Italian attack on the Suez Canal', he dreamt.[79]

News of Hitler's largest gamble delighted Churchill – he had a new ally. In the hours preceding the Nazi juggernaut, the British prime minister dispatched two telegrams – the first notified Wavell of his dismissal (in the backwash of recent setbacks), the second called for General Claude Auchinleck as his replacement. Uppermost in Churchill's mind was a new desert offensive to relieve Tobruk.

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘We had a lot of mates to account for’

Rommel’s ambitious design faltered at Tobruk. With no end to the siege in sight, Morshead’s men eked out a basic, yet dangerous existence peppered by moments of reflection, grief and wit as they awaited relief or an end to the siege. ‘Tobruk is tough’, Colonel Norman Speirs (Australian Army Medical Corps), an individual described as ‘phlegmatic, imperturbable and cheerful’, declared. ‘British Tommies, veterans of Narvik and Dunkirk’, collectively swore that Tobruk was:

the most bitter and severe fighting they have seen. Moreover, an old Digger who was in the last war says that some of the barrages were as thick as anything In France from 1914 to 1918. Add to this dive-bombing and aerial machine-gunning. It is no picnic.[1]

Sharing the same sentiment, Private Harry Brown (2/28th Battalion) a Perth benchman, bemoaned to his sister how ‘conditions here are really terrible’, an area sans ‘one redeeming feature’.

However, we have taken it for nearly six months now, and I guess we can manage as long again, for the Aussie, despite his continual growl, has a sense of humour which helps considerably. We have just come from the hottest part of the front line, and there has been quite a thinning out of the ranks unfortunately, but that is part of the horror of war. We have all had our own little experiences, some that I wouldn’t like to go through again.[2]

Rest in the forward areas, as we can only try to imagine, proved challenging. It was a combat zone racked by extremes in temperature, frequent sandstorms and countless insects, alongside enemy shelling, mortaring and bombing. Boredom too was an inescapable adversary; ‘this is

a nerve-racking game we're on and the worst part is the days of inactivity and waiting – waiting for one knows not what', 40-year-old Private John Butler (2/23rd Battalion) aired.[3] The ever-present danger of sniping and shelling, as we have read, compelled a troglodyte-like existence in the exposed front line. The 'sight of a man's head a few inches above the parapet would draw a spiteful fusillade', Brisbane's *Telegraph* explained.[4] Writing from the front line, Driver Gordon Davison, a Sydney accountant, longed to be relieved.

I think I told you that this position is considered to be one of the 'hot seats', and as such it is necessary for us to stay up all night and then try and catch up a few hours' sleep by day. Jerry's closest position to us here is about 300 yards away, so you can guess we get some shooting practice, together with a lot of ducking, as the enemy goes in quite a lot for snipers. I had quite a thrilling experience the other day with one. I happened to spot his hideout, so I let him have it – 30 rounds all on the mark. They kicked up little puffs of dust all over the spot where I saw him, but unfortunately his cover was too good. However, I had apparently annoyed him, and he, in turn, must have seen where I was firing from, for he gave my position a thorough pasting. But I, too, had good cover. Still, a sniper remains one of the most trying things in warfare, and he certainly keeps you on your toes.[5]

(Davison was later killed on 30 July 1942 during the fighting at El Alamein.)

Captain Raymond Conway (2/28th Battalion) was taken prisoner during the 'final desperate attempt to eliminate the Germans' from the Salient. 'Our troubles began immediately after we were handed over to the Italians', Captain Conway stated after his repatriation from Germany in 1945,

for they never forgave the 6th Division for what they called the rape of Benghazi. They certainly did not like the Australians, and we shared some rough treatment. On one occasion a sergeant was tied on the floor and beaten.

(Conway later escaped from a train headed for Germany with the help of RAAF Squadron Leader Andrew 'Nicky' Barr. 'For eighty-eight days I lived in haystacks and barns ... we made two attempts to get across the Swiss border, but finally the Fascists caught us.' Returned to a POW camp, Conway was eventually liberated by American troops.)[6]

Captain George Yates, whom we met leaving Fremantle, found his battalion in a ‘sticky’ area near the Salient. Inside the RAP, a ‘hot and stuffy’ cave, he watched as two casualties were brought in.

... broken legs in each case as well as more serious injuries to one of the men. The ‘Doc’ and the Padre got to work, the Padre helping with the splints. The other orderlies were kept busy on minor cases. I watched the Padre [Thomas Macdonald] as he skilfully assisted the MO in attending to the men. One was mortally wounded, it was discovered. He was weakening, yet conscious. Strange to say a few letters arrived at this moment, one of which was for the dying man. At his request the Padre opened it, then kneeling down alongside the stretcher he commenced reading out the contents quietly. He comforted the brave man till the ambulance arrived with talks of his family and other things. Rarely have I witnessed such pathos as I did on this occasion. The man died the following morning, quietly and without pain. All through the night and the following day the MO and the padre toiled, till at last they were able to snatch a well-deserved rest.[7]

Sergeant Raymond Cole (2/17th Battalion), a 27-year-old married labourer from Orange (NSW), ‘certainly needed a spell’, finding it ‘impossible to convey an idea of how four months of continuous fighting in the front line can change a man, it seems like four years ...’ But with a measure of hope: ‘They are concentrating on bombing and starving us out but will not succeed in either.’[8]

Quartermaster Lieutenant George Yates in Tobruk, 27 April 1941. Yates, a former car salesman, joined the militia in 1937. Opting for a military career, he passed through Randwick Small Arms School as instructor and was stationed at Geraldton at the outbreak of the war. Later mentioned in despatches for services in New Guinea, Yates was elected as member for Canning (WA) in 1937. (AWM RCDIG1026653)

‘Like rats in a trap’

Tobruk fell in the crosshairs of Nazi propagandist Lord Haw Haw, the turncoat Irish American William Joyce. Mocking the garrison – ‘caught like rats in a trap’ – Haw Haw’s daily tirades on Berlin radio would open with a conniving greeting such as ‘good morning to our desert rats at Tobruk’ or ‘hello, you uneducated convicts’. A volley of insults would follow, Raymond Cole remembered, with Haw Haw denigrating 9th Division soldiers as the ‘worst part of the British Empire because we are volunteers and are merely self-supporting prisoners.’[9] Laid up in Tobruk hospital, an AIF captain enjoyed the polemic warnings of impending doom:

‘Am I right that you have not even got one plane now. You scum of the earth, we’re sending over 100 planes to exterminate you’, and this goes on night after night, and we laugh, as it really does cheer us up to know we are

such a thorn in his side. But if ever we are lucky enough to get hold of Mr Joyce after the show is over, we will string him up and then we'll give him 'rats of Tobruk.'[10]

'The Australians' propensity for misappropriation', Lieutenant Nicol McLellan (2/48th Division) shared with his mother, 'earned them special recognition' in Haw Haw's distorted commentary as 'Ali Baba Morshead and his 20,000 Thieves'.[11] 'Frequently we laughed and joked until the tears came into our eyes', a South Australian private recalled, 'he was a great tonic.' A Queensland corporal took the joke a little further, fashioning an unofficial 'Rats of Tobruk' medal, 'portraying a rampant rodent' from metal salvaged from the fuselage of a wrecked aircraft and shell casings. Quickly sought after, engineers later struck some 400 examples. 'So the fun began', Lieutenant Leonard Barlow (2/1st Pioneer Battalion) recalled after 'awarding' one to Lieutenant Colonel Arnold Brown (2/1st Pioneer Battalion); 'everyone from the general down wanted one of these medals.'[12]

'A cup of tea'

Months into the siege, grievances were understandably aired regarding the 'monotony of the landscape, the food and the dust', though life according to one Digger was 'not without interest or excitement'.[13]

'The life is still exciting, despite its tragedies and horror', Belfast-born Staff Sergeant James Mulcahy (2/23rd Battalion), a Melbourne property salesman, advised his mother. 'The same feeling that brought me into the war still exists and I wouldn't be happy if I were back in Melbourne living a life of ease while all my cobbers were still in the thick of it.' Having grown up in a country devoid of serpents, 'amidst all the excitement of battles and bombings', Mulcahy's greatest fear was 'the snakes which abound here ... One crawled over me while I was asleep, and young [Richard] Dick Fancke whacked it with a stick. He killed it, of course, but nearly broke my leg.'[14]

A soldier's free time was largely devoted to shoring up defensive positions and maintaining weapons. Some men indulged in scrounging or fashioning items of interest from battlefield detritus to be sent home as a memento of the siege. Outgoing mail conveyed a variety of front-line souvenirs. Deactivated Italian hand grenades, for example, made convenient eggcups; cut-down shell casings were crafted into ornamental ashtrays.

Enemy bayonets were especially prized, with Axis prisoners often stripped of their accoutrements, a practice irking Lieutenant Andrew Fletcher (2/13th Battalion) of Walcha (NSW): 'Some of the fellows have been pinching stuff off the prisoners, wounded and dead, pistols and so on, a lot have been going a bit far.'[15]

Lining up for lunch at the inner Blue defensive line, July 1941. (AWM RCDIG1026653)

In one package, Private Ronald Kleist's (2/13th Battalion) parents in Blackheath (NSW) received an assortment of Nazi paraphernalia including a bayonet, a pair of socks, an aluminium strut from a downed aircraft (fashioned into a letter knife) and an anti-tank bullet with tracer charge. Not surprisingly, routine orders soon cited instances where 'live grenades and other dangerous articles have been dispatched in mailbags thereby causing unnecessary danger to life and property' – and the practice was banned.[16]

* * *

'Life is just going on the same old way', Gunner James Stephens (2/12th Field Regiment) wisecracked; 'any time now we are expecting to get news from home telling us that the war is over and that we have been left here forgotten.' Otherwise, on a more contemplative note,

there is nothing better these days than a cup of tea boiled on a primus stove round about midnight and a good yarn about old times. War has really taught me two things, appreciation and patience, two valuable assets in the periods to come after it is all over. That is about the main thing in our lives these days – just thinking of what we will do when the war is over.[17]

(Stephens was later wounded in action at El Alamein on 26 October 1942.)

Crouched in his hole, a 'Rat' began a letter. 'I'll try and give you some impressions of life over here', he jotted.

It is still fairly early in the morning. I'm in a hole in the ground. It's about four feet deep, three feet wide and six feet long. I'm sharing it with a cobber. We've been living in holes for quite a few weeks now. We are in desert country and dust storms occur three days out of four . . . and they ARE dust storms! While moving up to this position visibility was thirty feet. This was one occasion when we were glad of the dust as it screened our movements from the enemy. We were under artillery fire at the time. Our trench – really a dug-out – collects three to four inches of dust daily. It gathers on everything – faces, hands, clothing and equipment. Water is rationed so we shave very occasionally and wash with the shaving water. A wash a week is about all we get. We have not had our clothes off for almost a month, except for a swim at one of the places we remained at for a few days. It is almost four days since we moved forward and occupied this position – not in the front line, because ours is a support platoon. Our mortars are a form of light howitzers, and our position is, therefore, between the front line and the artillery. I have scarcely been out of this hole since I reached it. One of the first half dozen shells fired at us landed no more than twenty feet from where my cobber and I were crouching in our shallow shelter. This, of course, did not help to reassure us in our first taste of … bombardment from the air and light artillery …. As those first half dozen shells landed, we were showered with earth. Large lumps of shrapnel screamed harmlessly overhead. We had to lay low for about half an hour (it seemed like six months) listening to other missiles whistling over and bursting a short distance away. It's a far better feeling when you hear the whistle approaching from the rear and a burst beyond. That's our boys on the job. Even as I write this letter this is what is going on. It goes on all the time. We made our dugouts deeper after the first day and we felt much better. I had a bundle of *Sporting Globes* from you, and I was just able to

hold them steady enough to have a read ... And so the days go on finding us squatting or lying in our little excavation. Now and again rifle and machine-gun fire. Artillery duels, the crunch of aerial bombs and droning planes overhead tell of an attack.[18]

A German 500-pound bomb exploded some 50 yards from where Frank O'Donnell was sleeping. 'We were "earthed", he later told, 'and did not suffer any injury, but we were deaf for days afterwards, and could not see for fumes'. The fumes led some to believe that gas was being used; masks were donned. Another soldier, the same distance from the blast as O'Donnell, had a leg blown off for not going to ground.[19]

The sheer terror of a dive-bombing attack featured in a Digger's writing.

Two bombs landed in the middle of my section line but by the grace of God only the first (and smaller) [one] exploded. The second weighed a ton but happily was a dud. Two dugouts were ten feet away from the first but fortunately the inmates were elsewhere – every scrap of their clothing was torn to shreds – blasted away but no one was hurt. I was cowering in a hole about 50 yards away listening to the fiendish whistle of the bombs falling.

Bomb bursting inside Tobruk near the Bardia Rd. August 1941. (AWM RCDIG1026653)

Private Arthur Ramsden (2/28th Battalion), a Perth labourer, likewise described a Stuka raid.

They, came out of the sun like bullets, dropped their eggs with a terrific bang and then cleared off. Suddenly then, turned and came back again opening up on us with machine guns. There was a splutter of dust and we disappeared like magic. I'm getting like greased lightening in getting below ground.[20]

(Born in Leeds, UK, Ramsden was killed at El Alamein on 2 November 1942.)

'A chap often flattens out during a raid like a lizard drinking water (not so good) and hopes for the best', Acting Warrant Officer Class Two Max McCormack (2/8th Field Ambulance) discovered. 'The blighters come out of the sun with machine guns spitting their hardest and eggs dropping everywhere.'[21] Falling shrapnel presented an additional danger, 'red hot and it doesn't pay to have too much fall on one', Signaller William Marchant (2/28th Battalion) informed his mother in Maylands (WA).[22] For a moment, Private Reginald 'Reg' Dun, a Beaudesert (Qld) truck driver, thought a stricken aircraft was going to fall on him.

A German bomber crashed near me the other night ... There were four airmen killed in it; only one baled out successfully. Two of them were burnt in the 'plane, and the other two were killed outright when they jumped out. We had to bury them the next day. It gave me the biggest fright of my life, as it was about one o'clock in the morning, and I thought it was going to fall right on me. It fell only about eighty yards away, and the bombs it was carrying blew up and the machine caught on fire.[23]

* * *

Writing from his 'dug out, slit trench, or funk hole, or whatever you like to call it', a Digger evoked his surroundings in a message to his parents in Murrayville (Vic.). 'It's a 3ft. wide, 14ft. long, 6ft. deep trench with 2ft. thick roof, which we kid ourselves will stop a shell'.

Life here is fairly lively at times as you may guess. It's starting to get on my nerves, nearly five months continuous action. Starting to duck I am, at nothing. But I belt Heinie is jumping more often, anyhow we will be still ducking when he has chucked it in.[24]

‘Bomb happy’. Private David Weller (2/1st Pioneer Battalion), a farm labourer from Cambewarra (NSW), was wounded in action at Tobruk on 14 April 1941. Invalided home to Australia as medically unfit, Weller is seen here in bed at the 113th AGH at Concord (NSW), working on a decorative textile while Sister E. Benson combs his hair. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

The interminable nervousness and fear contributed to at least 234 cases of self-inflicted wound (SIW) and ‘shellshock’ within the Australian division during May. In one week alone, 30 SIW cases were reported. ‘Besides constant air raids and shelling’, Major David Benjamin documented soldiers’ mental anguish.

The troops were affected by a mental attitude of frustration not unlike claustrophobia. There were many cases of desertion and a smaller number of self-inflicted wounds. Some cases of desertion could be attributed to a ‘bomb happy’ state in much the same manner as shell shock in the 1914–18 War, and others were possibly due to plain fear.[25]

The symptoms of anxiety neurosis, a condition we call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), would ‘come on gradually’, the 9th Division detailed, elaborating that a man would first lose interest in his work,

he misses meals, is careless about his dress, becomes less communicative with his friends and very irritable. He begins to eat less and less, gets less sleep and finally becomes physically and mentally exhausted. He complains of feeling tired and of pain referred to some part of the body, usually the stomach or the heart ... on physical examination, nothing abnormal can be made out. One characteristic feature of this condition is the general appearance of misery. There is a continual expression of misery on the face of the sufferer, and he walks about as if he had all the cares of the world on his shoulders.[26]

A 70-bed ‘war neurosis clinic’ was established in an underground shelter in the town. Of the 207 admissions, 61 percent were soldiers serving in fighting units. Measures were introduced to lessen the incidence of SIW, such as only cleaning weapons in supervised groups.[27] Some men were invalided home. Corporal James Larner (9th Division HQ), a Perth bricklayer, was ‘sent home for a spell’, described as ‘bomb happy’ after almost daily machine-gunning and bombing, with ‘flesh wounds and jarred nerves’.[28] English-born Private James Parker (2/1st Pioneer Battalion), a Dubbo carpenter and joiner before enlisting, was also invalided back to Australia in August 1941 ‘suffering from the effects of anxiety neurosis’. Forty-one-year-old Parker remembered the scream of a German dive-bomber and the terrific crash of a bomb. ‘Then the world became blank for him’, a local newspaper related, ‘and the space between that moment and one when he found himself in hospital in Tobruk five days later is to him just like encountering a book from which a page has been removed.’ Back in Dubbo after several months in hospital, and ‘totally incapacitated’, he was granted a ‘niggardly’ weekly pension to provide for his wife and three children.

He walks with the aid of a stick, but that is not sufficient to keep him from steering an erratic course. Recognised as a good tradesman before the war, he is unable now to drive a nail – that is, when looking at it with both eyes open. His injury was such that he sees two nails, so it is necessary for him to close one eye. Continually he suffers head pains and a slight deafness.[29]

Parker was able to join a local dance orchestra, but died suddenly during a performance on 8 September 1943. In her letter to the Army, Parker's wife asked if she was entitled to a War Widow's Badge, since her husband's death had followed on from 'war injuries'. Her request was denied, since 'the deceased member' must have been 'killed in action or died of wounds or other causes whilst on service.' A post-mortem examination failed to establish the cause of death, with a coroner later finding that Parker had died from natural causes 'hastened by war'.[30]

The science of psychiatry began to use newly developed drugs in combination with vocational and occupational therapy, which were, Melbourne's *Age* reported, the 'chief weapons in the doctor's armament for fighting mental and physical disabilities.'

About 5 per cent, of the returned men at present in the Heidelberg [115th Heidelberg Military Hospital] are 'war neurosis' cases. To the layman, that proportion may seem high, in view of the fact that Australian troops, at least by 1914–18 standards, have seen action for a comparatively brief period. But to medical men the proportion of men who have come back with what in the last war would have been called shell-shock, and in this is dubbed 'bomb-happy' in Digger jargon and 'war neurosis' or 'anxiety states' in professional parlance, has been no surprise. There is always a proportion of men who, through no fault of their own, could not stand up to the rigors of war.[31]

Frank O'Donnell, whom we saw invalided home with a grenade injury, had yet to see the 'man over there who is not frightened'. In his view,

It is not because of the fear of death, but the awful suspense waiting for something to happen. Soldiers who served in 1914–18 reckon that the Great War was only a tea party to this one. If you can concentrate on something, then it is not so bad.[32]

The universal risk of dying, a soldier mused, engendered a philosophical approach toward life.

... a bloke is only alive hour by hour. A mate of mine was telling me about his plans when he got home, 30 minutes later they dropped a shell on him that's how it is here. We don't seem to look at it on the bad side we've seen so much and been so close to death that a lot of us are 100% fatalists.[33]

A sheet of galvanised iron became a salvo scoreboard for ‘another chap’ in Sergeant Harold Davey’s shelter.

... we were counting the shells, and there he was, reaching out and putting a stroke of a pencil on the tin as a scoring board, and cursing fluently [all] the while. He had two columns, one for hits and one for misses. There could not possibly have been any entry under the hits column, as any one hit would have been ‘ex-hits’ – yes, plural – for both of us. Very cool and casual ...[34]

‘Most of the boys are a bundle of nerves’, a ‘front-liner’ diarised. ‘Anyone who reckons he’s not scared is a blasted liar’, the soldier penned in an entry telling how the ‘Hun shelled us with the big stuff ... Brian had his leg nearly blown off and I had to carry him half a mile on my back.’[35] Some idea of the volume of steel rained down on the fortress are the figures for the period of 26 June to 6 August, a relatively quiet time, when an average of 650 shells fell each day, a daily total reaching 1,000 in September.[36] ‘There is a popular saying of the last war that you never hear the shell that gets you’, a ‘Rat’ informed a friend back in Australia.

I used to wonder how that could be, but I know it is true now because it is the same with a near miss. The other night we heard the guns and in an instant everything went black. I expected to find myself flitting around the clouds with a brand-new pair of wings, but the blackness was due to the blast, dust and I suppose, momentary concussion. But we didn’t hear the whistle at all because the shell travels faster than the noise.[37]

‘An unmistakable whistle’ interrupted a friendly game of cricket that Private Charles ‘Les’ Roberts (2/32nd Battalion), a sleeper hewer from Echuca (Vic.), and mates were playing out of the front line.

You ought to have seen the boys go for the dugouts! It was a scream. One chap was just running up to bowl, but he dropped the ball and ran the other way. We could have stayed where we were as the bombs fell half a mile away.[38]

Happenstance saw 34-year-old Gunner Cyril Welch (2/5th Field Artillery Regiment) crawl into an old trench, a former dugout used by his fellow gunners, during a raging battle. In disconsolate mood, he picked up a crumpled piece of newspaper, which by chance was from his hometown.

Studying the page, he read a verse about Australian flora and fauna. Emotions came to a head when he realised the piece was written by his mother-in-law, whom he loved dearly.[39]

Levity, as we have seen, offered a crutch to the maimed, a means to make light of their fear and misfortune. Grant Thorpe (whom we saw after an aforementioned skirmish with Rommel's troops) referenced a nasty incident.

One of our boys was bit by a mortar bomb – lost one leg below the knee. We all sympathised with him while he was being dressed for the hospital. All he said was, 'I had a tiresome in-grown toenail on that foot, it won't worry me again.'[40]

In a letter to his mother in Glendevie (Tas.), Private Douglas Stubbs (2/12th) reassured her that he was 'quite well again after being wounded when participating in a spot of shooting in the desert.'

It was nothing serious – just a grazed scalp and has now completely healed over, thanks to the good medical staff and the nurses. They are a swell lot, the nurses. They look after us just like our own mothers. I really think it was worth while being wounded just to get the attention.[41]

Later, in Adelaide, Captain Essington Day, commanding officer of the South Australian District Discharge and Reception Depot, spoke to an invalided soldier propped up in bed aboard the Dutch hospital ship *Oranji*, asking what was wrong with him. 'I just collected a scratch or two', the Digger replied. In truth he'd lost both legs.[42]

'War is not all grim', Private Michael Eisdell remarked, back in Australia after returning from Tobruk with a splintered knee, and 'the Aussie sense of humour is strong and as individual as ever.' Eisdell, 'bomb happy' months earlier in Tobruk after receiving a bullet in the leg and dragging himself 'home' by following the north star, was 'a bundle of nerves until he landed in Sydney', a newspaper sketeched. The ABC announcer was described as: 'lying, bronzed and laughing in a cane lounge convalescing in the garden of friends'.[43] (Discharged and resuming his peacetime role, Eisdell was sent to New Guinea as a broadcaster in 1944.)

'The wings of death brush our faces'

Labelled the ‘Verdun of the desert’, Tobruk’s front line now resembled the mesh of trenches epitomising the Western Front, though minus the mud and the comfortable rest billets behind the lines, save for the occasional opportunity to bathe at the beach. Swimming was a popular form of relaxation, though an excursion from the front line came at a cost, Private William Officer (2/32nd Battalion) cogitated.

While we were up at the salient, 300 yards from the enemy, one of us from each section was allowed to go down to the beach ... We had to go out in the ration truck which came within walking distance of our part of the line about 11.30 each night to bring our supplies for next day. We had 24 hours out and returned the next night. I went one night when it was full moon and the enemy must have noticed it shining on the truck. The track was bad and we could only go at walking pace and were under fire for about 15 minutes until we were out of their sight, and the machine gun bullets went over, and under and all round the truck, and a lot of them were tracer bullets which glow at night, so we could see how very close to us they came. We got to our behind the line position about 3 a.m. and I lay down to rest and was rudely awakened by the Luftwaffe coming over on a bombing raid, some bombs dropping nearby. Then in the morning I had my swim and had just returned when ‘Bardia Bill’ [a large calibre German artillery piece] opened up, and put, I suppose, 50 shells over our heads in half an hour, some falling right along the path I had taken coming back from the beach. Sometimes we used to get a laugh up there too. One night a chap got lost and wandered right to the German wire and started coo-ee-ing. He came back in great haste with a hail of lead behind him. Another night a German got lost and came running along our wire calling out ‘Emil, Emil.’[44]

A swim at Tobruk was not without danger. Private Francis Paget (2/28th Battalion) recalled how ‘every few weeks trucks would take us down to the beach for a quick swim and bath to clean up. Machine guns had to be mounted for anti-aircraft protection as dive bombers were to be expected any time.’ (Author’s collection)

‘Down for a dip’, August 1941. A stanza of a popular Diggers’ poem read: ‘Sometimes we go in swimming. And float about at ease. The water clear as crystal. And nice clean salty breeze. When

down comes blasted Hermann. And we have to sling our hook. We dive clean to the bottom in This place they call Tobruk.' (AWM RCDIG1026653)

Air raids on the town and harbour were commonplace, with no fewer than 787 logged in the first three months of the siege. 'Here is the most blitzed town in Africa', the *Egyptian Mail* declared, 'you can almost set your watch by the daily and nightly Stuka raids. Thousands of tons of bombs have been unloaded on the battered and white walled town and the arid acres which surround it, yet Tobruk is far from tottering.'[45] Billeted in a large Italian building near the waterfront, a 'wonderful target', Corporal William Donaldson (AASC), a former Sydney draper's assistant, was sitting on his bed trying to remember the words to a song he would shortly perform at a concert.

Suddenly there was a hideous explosion – just outside it seemed – and the room was filled with smoke. We rushed to the back door, and a blast of air slammed in our faces – we were trapped. By now we could hear the ominous droning of the planes, and the horrible scream of bombs as they fell around us. The building rocked drunkenly with every explosion, and it was now difficult to see through the haze and smoke. Looking wildly round for cover, we noticed the heavy concrete washing tubs in the corner. With one accord we dived under them in the vain hope that when the building collapsed, and no one doubted it would, the heavy tubs would protect us from a certain amount of the falling masonry. As we crouched there no one spoke, but we all murmured a prayer, and my heart was pumping so wildly in my throat that it threatened to choke me. With a sickening crash the windows burst in, and the air was filled with flying glass. Each bomb that now fell seemed to be taking another ten feet off the building, and we crouched there waiting for the end. Miraculously, the sound of the planes began to fade away and we quickly wrenched open the doors, rushed to the shelter, and leapt in, expecting any moment for the bombers to return ... Never will I forget the horror and nausea that overcame me as we worked feverishly to liberate the men buried under the mass of fallen masonry. One captain, half buried under huge concrete blocks, and with a ghastly wound over one eye, sat there patiently waiting to be freed. Feeble groans came from the wreckage under his feet. Someone was buried. Another captain had been blown from the back of the building, through the walls to the front, and every bit of clothing had been ripped from him. Finally, we had

them all out and, although there were some terrible injuries, no one was killed ... We felt the wings of death brush our faces that summer evening.[46]

Lieutenant Douglas Balfour-Ogilvy's (2/10th Battalion) Universal Carrier platoon was machine-gunned by Stukas emerging from their bombing dive.

Unfortunately for one of the bastards all our men had their Bren guns mounted for action and got a dive bomber. He crashed up about 300 yards away and burst into flames. It was extra good shooting – just like going after ducks, but not so pleasant while his guns were on us – but our blokes got their range and you could see the bullets hitting the plane.[47]

(Balfour-Ogilvy was later appointed GSO (Air) on General Blamey's staff and mentioned in despatches.)

In open defiance of the Hague Convention, Private Hubert Lang (2/43rd Battalion) witnessed German bombers attack both the hospital and hospital ships at anchor (a discussion topic endorsed by censors).

They usually drop three, four and five at a time, and believe me they shoot up a bit of dust when they hit the ground. I have seen the bombs fall into the sea and shoot up a spout of water about 80 ft. high. By jove when you hear a bomb whistling through the air it's time to dive under. A bomb landed about 200 yards from my rabbit hole one day and crack bang. Gee! It makes a funny feeling go through you. It shook the old earth and made the dust fly, and I poked my head out and said to Jerry, 'You missed, you dirty dog.'[48]

Thirty-seven-year-old Corporal Harry Williams (2/4th Field Company) was on board the hospital ship *Vita* – conspicuously marked with large Red Cross emblems – when it was attacked on 14 April 1941 by German dive-bombers. Seriously damaged, the crew and patients were transferred to the destroyer HMAS *Waterhen.* A prepayment collector from North Sydney, Williams had been injured at Derna when he picked up a booby-trapped iron bar. Shattered by the explosion, his left hand was later amputated. Invalided home as 'medically unfit', Williams disembarked at Sydney on 24 June. Further hardship followed, with a notice to vacate his Lane Cove home. 'I have tramped miles to find a house', he explained to a journalist two months later, 'but when agents learn I have six children they assure me that they have nothing to offer.' Not to be overcome, Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* later reported that Williams was building a 'galvanised iron

shack' for his wife and children as interim accommodation until a house was available under the Rural Bank scheme. 'I was a natural southpaw [left-handed]', he said, 'and the hardest job has been having to saw and hammer with my right hand.'[49]

Corporal Don Perkins (2/17th Battalion), a first-grade cricketer, was also aboard the *Vita* during the attack. Hit in the leg by machine gun fire during the earlier retreat into Tobruk – 'I had quite an exciting time with the Huns after us' – Perkin was similarly rescued by Australian sailors. Slamming the enemy, 'they are a rotten lot and have no scruples about bombing hospitals and the like', he flagged the 'real courage' of the British hospital staff 'when the bombs were falling, they just carried on with their work and had a cheery word for everyone. The worst of it is that they were defenceless, and hadn't guns to defend themselves with, as we had.'[50] (Perkins, as we will read, fought at El Alamein and was twice wounded in the New Guinea campaign.)

Though 'our tents were well enough marked' with a large Red Cross, Glasgow-born Private William Harrison (2/2nd Australian Clearing Station) saw firsthand that it 'made no difference to the Jerries.'

> They dived repeatedly, but not the Italians. That is the truth, and I couldn't have believed it unless I saw it with my own eyes. On two different occasions I thought it was the end of myself as I got shook by the blast of the bombs, and I can tell you I prayed for my deliverance. I was caught out in the open and had no trench to jump into, and just had to lie flat down. I can tell you it is terrifying and plays up with your nerves; it's an awful experience. I admit quite readily there were times when I was afraid, but I carried on with my work just the same. I saw wonderful courage shown by others and it helps one to do likewise. There were times when I would be helping someone who was wounded and I would pretend to them that there was no danger, and try not to show I was anxious, but I felt the strain just the same.[51]

Wounded in action on 7 May 1941 with injuries to his legs, head and chest, Private George Power (2/13th Battalion), a drover from Wagga Wagga (NSW), was evacuated by sea, only to fall victim to marauding enemy aircraft.

On a Friday I will never forget we were taken on a vessel loaded with sick and wounded and a lot of Itie and German prisoners, some of them wounded. About 9 p.m., when we were a few miles out, two enemy planes came over and dive-bombed us, hitting the stern of the boat. Down she went in three or four minutes. We all went over the sides like a mob of cattle over a fence and was it cold! When I hit the water, I thought I was never coming up again, and when I did I could not get off my back. But I think when the boilers burst the explosion must have turned me over. We were all in a heap together, but it was not long before we were like little black dots here and there in a very rough sea. A lot of woodwork from the wreckage was floating about, and we got some hard knocks from it. I managed to get hold of a piece of board about 20 feet long and hung on. Then I saw a boat in front of me and I could hear the others getting on board. I was frightfully cold and could not see anything of the others now. I don't know how long we had been in the water by now, but things did not look too bright for us. Then what a shock I got. I saw a boat only a few yards away from me. When I asked the sailor to give me a hand up, I think he got a big shock. When I was in the water I was thinking of a 'Pommy' who was in a bed next to me at Tobruk. When he would see the doctor coming round in the morning he would say 'my poor, poor, dear leg,' and I was thinking the same about mine. You would have thought a horse had kicked me over the left eye, it was so black and swollen. I had skin off everywhere. When we finally got on another boat you should have seen us. We had about two weeks' growth of beard, no boots, no hats. But my leg made up for a few things, as it was about as big as four legs. The sisters here are all very good to us, but it will be good to be back with the boys again.[52]

Stretchered aboard a punt for ferrying to a hospital ship, another AIF casualty craned his head skyward.

You could not see the sky for them, and it seemed like thousands of Hun planes; they flew in threes and dive-bombed the hospital ship, and when they had let her have it they chased us with their machine guns. Luckily the chap in the motorboat showed great presence of mind, and towed us to an old wreck; so for nearly an hour we dodged round and round that wreck with bullets everywhere. Believe me when I say I was frightened, as I was so helpless tied to a stretcher. However, we were lucky as no one was hit on our barge. The chaps on the hospital ship were not so lucky, and

unfortunately many of them went West. We were eventually brought ashore and taken back to what was left of the hospital. We got back a bit after midnight; and I'll never be able to express how disappointed we all were (there are few of us that believe we will ever leave here alive.) Just after midnight they came and took 100 of us down to the beach, and at 4 o'clock, the grey form of the destroyer sneaked in and within 30 minutes we were loaded and on our way – and what a thrill it was tearing along at about 40 miles an hour. We nearly got hit getting out, but the Navy knew what to do and out went a smoke screen, and we arrived at Mersa Matruh the next day. My stretcher was on deck, and I've never had such a thrill watching the water fly past; we were simply flying through the water, and did the Navy mother us? They made us tea and beef tea, and did we lap it up? I've never been so thirsty in all my life, and they did everything humanly possible to make us comfortable ... it took more than 40 gallons of water to get even the top layer of dirt off me, but eventually I was clean and was put to bed between clean sheets; you can guess what that was like after Tobruk, where I had one blanket which was absolutely stiff with some poor beggar's blood, and the flies.[53]

Italian propaganda endeavoured to turn the tables the following year, citing fictitious claims of attacks on hospital ships with accompanying threats of reprisal. For the moment, however, Tobruk was a rallying cry for the Allies, a much-needed demonstration of staunch resistance against seemingly impossible odds. In his address to a Sydney audience on 19 August, Menzies posed the (rhetorical) question: what was the 'most marvellous thing that Australians have done in this war'? His response: 'the defence of Tobruk.'[54]

Tobruk Cemetery. Corporal John Joseph Kelly (2/15th Battalion), a cellarman from Charters Towers, died from wounds on 17 June 1941 and was buried in the bottom left grave. Kelly's grieving father, John, later signed for receipt of his son's personal effects: 'a wallet, religious emblem, swimming trunks, lanyard whistle, pencil case, a pair of mittens, hair brush, scarf and money belt.' (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

'I thought how foolish and futile war is'

Notwithstanding the ever-present danger from two armies warring in a static battlefield, an unusual degree of chivalry existed between the Germans and the British forces. Both sides respected and appreciated the difficulties under which they lived and fought. Even Rommel referred to the entire North African campaign as *Krieg ohne Hass* ('war without hate'). Compassion towards enemy soldiers was recorded by a Digger in the wake of the Easter fighting.

One of the Germans, an officer came to see me. He was crying and asked if he could speak with his Captain before he died, so I took him over, but had to turn my back. The Captain died a few minutes later, and he covered him

with a swastika [flag], made a smart about turn, gave the Nazi salute, and came to me with tears rolling down his cheeks, and said 'Now I await your command'. I was terribly touched, and could not feel bitter about it, and gave them water before I handed them over.[55]

In the aftermath of a bloody afternoon attack on the German-held Post R7, a young Queensland priest, Father Thomas 'Tommy' Gard (2/43rd Battalion) and three men (Sergeant Walter 'Wally' Tuit, stretcher-bearer Private Keith Pope and a driver), ventured into no man's land in a truck emblazoned with the Red Cross in search of casualties. A German officer appeared, warning of a minefield that an enemy sapper obligingly guided them through. The party received received permission to retrieve the wounded Australians not yet conveyed to the enemy rear.[56] Father Gard, as Major Reginald Wheeler (2/28th Battalion), a doctor from North Perth, recounted,

drove [with Tuit and Pope] through the thick of the fray right into the German lines on his errand of mercy. Recognising his feat of bravery, the enemy held their fire, assisted him to gather in the wounded, gave him a cigarette, let him have a rest, and guarded him safely back to the British lines, where he arrived with his truck filled with the wounded.[57]

'Thousands of tense hearts – and possibly a few tense fingers, too – relaxed', Captain Henry Marshall (2/23rd Battalion) recalled.[58]

Desert service, August 1941. (AWM RCDIG1026653)

A further bloodbath preceded what was probably the most famous let-up during the siege – a truce between the Germans and Australians on 4 August. It began, Private Victor Lane (2/13th Battalion), a Bren gunner from Wallerawang (NSW), narrated, after:

we saw a large body of men coming forward. We let them get within 0 yards and then opened up with everything we had. We Bren gunners just mowed them down. They were yelling and crying out like a lot of kids, but the more they yelled they more we gave it to them. As we had a lot of mates to account for we were feeling bitter towards them at the time. However, after about five minutes we stopped shooting, as they certainly had been taken by surprise, and hadn't the opportunity to fire a shot.[59]

'To this day I cannot understand why he [Rommel] sacrificed these men because they were in block formation and it was just like a shooting gallery', a former Digger raised after the war. 'Only a few feet separated our' dugout from the 'nearest dead. Most of us felt pretty sick about the mass slaughter, but our lives were at stake.'[60] What followed, in Corporal Allan Richards' (2/13th Battalion) words, was a 'rather remarkable experience'.

As daylight came we saw what appeared to be a white flag being waved from a sanger by a man. He was very cautious at first, but eventually stood up and we called out for him to come in. But he stood there waving till we perceived that it was a Red Cross flag. One of our officers got out and waved back, while heads popped out of holes and firing ceased along our sector of the line. At first we thought they were going to surrender, but when we saw the Red Cross we realised they were calling for an armistice to get their wounded out. They set off over the hill with a stretcher, helping another one to hobble along. We watched them put them in an ambulance which came down and then drive off and join 14 other ambulances round which were gathered a considerable number of men on stretchers and others standing and sitting around with their arms in slings and heads bandaged, etc. We could see this through [our] glasses. We didn't receive a single casualty. Meanwhile we sat up and began to take notice of our position and we could see some Germans sitting up and waving to us about half the distance to the sangers, or 200 yards ahead. At first, we thought they were wounded, so two of our stretcher bearers went out, only to find they were entrenched in holes with the dirt removed and armed with machine guns. Strange to say, the enemy appeared to be rather friendly and called out and waved to us. I heard the following conversation called over 'No man's land.' 'Can anyone speak English?' 'Yes.' 'How would you like a pot of beer?' 'Oh, good.' 'What do you think of the war?' 'I dink it iss a phoney var.' The Hun sounded like an American German. I'll never forget that morning and that little party wending their way over the hill with one in front holding the Red Cross flag up; two following with their burden on the stretchers; another coming behind carrying something with another two; one helping the other to hobble along, bringing up the rear. The sun was just peeping over the hill and there was a strange quiet stillness in the air. It was strange because there was usually so much firing from artillery, mortars, rifles and machine guns at this time of the morning. As I sat on the edge of the trench in the cool stillness of the morning, I thought how foolish and futile war is, and almost felt like going out and appealing to both sides to stop the foolishness. Won't it be a great day when all this carnage is over and there is peace, friendship and sanity in the world again![61]

Victor Lane's letter continues.

A red flare went up from the German trenches signifying that the armistice was over; but as neither side appeared to want to continue fighting, we sat in our dugout for a while. One of our chaps asked how Hitler was doing, and of course they straight away made some comment about Churchill; but as they spoke only 'pig' English, nobody was sure what it was … that night our battalion was relieved from the front line to go back for a few days spell near the harbour. The happening goes to prove that no matter how bitter towards each other are the people of two countries, they can become quite friendly in a few minutes. Probably you did not read about that armistice in the papers and probably never will as the friends and relatives of men in the trenches will be the only ones who will.[62]

(Private Victor Lane was killed on 29 October 1943 during the fighting near Finschhafen, New Guinea.)

* * *

Tobruk was 'a thorn!', Sydney's *Sun* proclaimed in early August 1941, almost four months into the siege.

It has proved a lance tipped with poison. The exploits of these few thousand men from our cities and our bush have become a legendary tale of heroism – not the impulsive heroism of a minute or two, but the 24 hour a day and seven day a week courage and cheerfulness which, of all troops in the world, only British troops can achieve – and, of all British troops, the Australians achieve most fully ... The Australians have broken all the rules of war. The right and immemorial conduct of a besieged force is to defend itself, but these men have made as many offensive sorties as they have fought defensive battles. 'Anzac' is a name of pride. 'Tobruk' in the years to come, will rival it.[63]

As Hitler's legions closed on Leningrad the following month, Melbourne's *Age* applauded the 'men of Tobruk' for doing 'the toughest job of the war', for 'courage of the highest order' and their 'endurance which matches that displayed in the most famous sieges in history'.[64]

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'... back in Egypt again, the land of stinks and sand'

Rommel faced an impasse. Standing on the threshold of Egypt, but having failed to take Tobruk, he was restrained from moving ahead until reinforcements – and authorisation – arrived. Forced onto the defensive after his failed May assault, his main task now was to hold Cyrenaica. Churchill, conversely, pressed for a new desert offensive, hoping to tip the balance, relieve Tobruk, and ease the costly victualing burden. A maritime lifeline sustained the fortress – a mixed flotilla of RN and Royal Australian Navy (RAN) destroyers, and miscellaneous craft, plying the so-called 'spud run' from Alexandria. Axis aircraft made the voyage a perilous task in daylight, forcing the miscellany of vessels to slip in during the hours of darkness. 'The boys of the Navy, who keep up our supplies and take out our sick and wounded, have our greatest admiration', wrote Corporal Keith McLean, who was invalided home in September 1941 with psoriasis; '... it is only on rare occasions that they are not dive-bombed. A great spirit of comradeship exists amongst the boys over there, and I only wish that the same spirit existed in Australia ...'[1]

Yet Tobruk, described as a 'running sore' to the enemy, was 'equally painful' to the RN.[2] In the period from 11 April to 9 December 1941, 26 naval vessels and five merchant ships were sunk while provisioning the fortress. One of the prime naval challenges was to safely extract and replace the Australian 9th Division. Even before the siege, Australia's War Cabinet voiced its disapproval to Whitehall about the AIF unfairly bearing the brunt of Britain's land-based war. A reminder of the 'Charter' stating the AIF would only serve abroad as a single corps under Australian command was

also sent. As it stood, by August 1941, Australian divisions had independently fought across North Africa, Greece, Crete and Syria. No two divisions had seen action together. With this principle in mind, Blamey pressed for the relief of Australian troops inside Tobruk. In parallel with Menzies' concern over domestic repercussions should Tobruk fall, Blamey was increasingly concerned over the garrison's state of health, which had been steadily deteriorating since leaving Palestine. Morale remained good, and the men looked 'browned and fit'. But as Private Archie Campbell indicated: 'We are all in very poor physical shape from eating just bully beef, etc., and have lost considerable condition through lack of proper food and water and sleep during night work, etc.'[3] The Diggers' worsening state was aggravated by the innumerable flies, sporadic cases of dysentery and the prevalence of gastroenteritis. Diarrhoea, a medical officer reported, was 'universal'.[4] In an improvised form of biological warfare, Australian patrols exploited the vermin and their effect on morale by dumping rubbish close to enemy lines.

A formal notice from the Australian government reached General Claude Auchinleck on 18 July. Churchill, in turn, ignored a separate cable from Menzies for two days, deeming it a 'needless relief '. It was ultimately decided to return the 18th Australian Brigade to its parent 7th Division and replace it with the 1st Polish Independent Carpathian Rifle Brigade; the British 70th Division would relieve the remainder of the 9th Division. Failing to retain parliamentary support, Menzies resigned on 29 August 1941. His short-lived successor, Arthur Fadden, remained unswerving, although Churchill made a final plea to convince him otherwise, appealing on 11 September that he should carefully weigh 'the immense responsibility which you would assume before history by depriving Australia of the glory of holding Tobruk till victory was won'. Canberra's stubborn position, however, plus an ultimatum from Blamey, even moved Auchinleck to consider resigning his position. Churchill next called upon John Curtin, elected prime minister on 3 October, to again reconsider Australia's position. Curtin, however, remained firm; the 'Rats' would be evacuated.

Relieving the 'Rats'

Private Alan Lowry (2/5th Field Ambulance), a Brisbane shop assistant, bade farewell to Tobruk.

It was a Sunday when all our unit was recalled from its various outposts within the perimeter, the Tommy ambulance taking our place. At 7 p.m. all personnel with full kits were called on to parade, where the CO addressed us, told us what we were about to do, warned us not to smoke and to be strictly quiet. It was a pitch-dark night. We could not see him, but just heard his voice, through the rumbling of the artillery. From the top of the hill where we were gathered, we could see our own and Jerry's flares shooting skyward out on the perimeter, also flashes from shell bursts. We then climbed aboard the trucks, and the convoy moved off at a snail's pace down to the town (or what is left of it). Here we debussed and marched along the scarred streets to the waterfront. We then had to sit or lie along the foot of a brick wall for about two hours. All ears were strained to their utmost listening for Jerry to make one of his usual half-hourly visits and drop flares on the harbor to see if anything was doing. But lucky for us he did not put in an appearance. Must have run out of petrol ration tickets or something. 'Old Bardia Bill' (a huge gun Jerry had out on the Bardia Road) was also kind to us and did not commence activities.

Troops began arriving at the wharf, in this case a former Italian freighter bombed and sunk by the Germans. Eyes probed the darkness for signs of incoming shipping.[5] 'And so in this tense atmosphere' Lowry sat, 'awaiting the appointed time (11.30 p.m.) for the destroyer to arrive.'

Right on the tick and living up to its name (the Silent Service) a burst of steam shooting up on the other side of the wreck was the first warning that our ship had arrived. Every man jumped with fright, as we had not the slightest inkling that she was even in the harbor. It still has me puzzled how those men guide these ships in and out of the wrecks and bring them alongside the wreck at the end of the wharf to be moored. It took them exactly eleven minutes to disembark troops and for us to embark. At the same time ammunition was being unloaded over the opposite side into invasion barges and wounded in stretchers hoisted over the side. As soon as we got underway, we began to sort ourselves out and find positions on the deck to sleep. The sailors were the essence of kindness and were all anxious to hear news of Tobruk. They made us supper and the chap I cobbered up with happened to be the mess steward and invited us down for a meal any time we cared to go. When we sailed out of the harbour there were three more destroyers waiting for us. These too had been in and loaded and

unloaded troops, stores, etc, and we did not even know they were there. Talk about the Silent Service! I dips me lid! With my life jacket as a pillow, I managed to get a few hours' sleep and emerged in the morning from my burrow like a baked rabbit. I have seen some pretty sights since I left Australia but there were none so picturesque as the sight of those four beautiful ships sailing through the waves in bright sunlight. The sea was a deep blue and the pure white foam seemed to sparkle like diamonds as it broke over the bows. It was a wonderful thrill flying along at 35 knots, first on one side then on the other, and gave one the sensation that he was competing in a yacht race and he one of the crew as the cold and invigorating salt spray splashed one's face. Only scare we had on the way down was when we saw a submarine approaching us. Much to our relief it turned out to be a British submarine with a large Union Jack painted on its side. We arrived in Alexandria at 1 p.m. after being thirteen hours on the water which was some contrast to our trip up – two days and two nights in the hold of an old tramp steamer ... As I stood there and watched the wounded men being loaded on to the ambulance vans, I could not help but think what a lucky chap I was to come out unscratched.[6]

Awaiting evacuation, time passed slowly during Sergeant Alan Baldwin's (2/12th Battalion) final week in Tobruk. At last, it was time to leave. Arriving harbourside, 'it seemed incredible that this night of all nights there would be no air raid' – a fortuitously quiet interlude.

It seemed a long wait, but it was probably not very long before we were climbing up the sides of the destroyer. Almost before we were aboard other troops were pouring into the barge to take our place. Four of our men slipped on the narrow decking of the barge and went to into the water in full marching order but were dragged out alright. One chap didn't even lose his rifle. We slept for what was left of that night wherever we could find room and at daybreak the crew rushed to action stations, and we were roused up to put on life belts for … the dive bombers try to catch us before our air force can pick us up. However, our luck held again and we saw no more trouble. That afternoon we were all back in Egypt again, the land of stinks and sand but it didn't seem so bad this time.[7]

Lorenzo 'Tom' Halloran (2/1st Field Park Company), a carpenter from Boggabilla (NSW), took note of the battered town and harbour.

Most buildings have gaping holes caused by constant bombing – first by the British and now by the Germans. Every building is pock-marked from rifle fire. These scars were all put there by the advancing Aussies in January. The Germans will never get close enough to cause damage by rifle fire. The small deep-water harbour is full of derelict ships; mostly Italian but some British. These boats bear mute testimony to the carnage of war as waged from the air. In the wide deserted streets, a few Australian gums still struggle for existence and provide the only bit of greenery in this war wracked Italian town.[8]

(Halloran was later killed in action in New Guinea on 22 September 1943.)

It was with 'mixed feelings' that Private Alfred Tongs (2/32nd Battalion), a Finley (NSW) storekeeper, left Tobruk, with 'a strong desire to get back to semi-civilisation with days and nights of peacefulness, good food, etc ... We are left with much that is pleasant to remember – much that is hard to forget.'[9] Rising British naval losses, however, led to the relief operation being cancelled, stranding the unfortunate 2/13th Australian Battalion, two companies of 2/15th Australian Battalion and 9th Division HQ staff inside the fortress until after the siege was lifted on 10 December. Thirty-five-year-old Driver Aubrey Clarke (2/13th Battalion) a farmer from Coraki (NSW), was among the unfortunates. 'It happened this way,' said Aubrey.

We were booked as the last of the bunch to move, but when we filed down to the wharf they turned my lot back as the boat we were to leave by got sunk as it was coming up the coast filled with Polish soldiers. So that was that. Back we went into the lines, and were there when the big push started, being the only Aussies in the show. However, the boys did splendid work, and after the big battle was over they got special commendation from the heads. We suffered a number of casualties, and I lost some very good mates, who had been with me since we enlisted.[10]

One of Clarke's fellow soldiers, Private Matthew Kirby, turned his hand to verse, making light of his situation in a composition later to become the unit song:

> O, we're [Frederick] Bull Burrows' Bomb-Happy Boys
> Back up the line we must go!

Once we were heading for Alex so fair
Something went wrong and we didn't get there ...[11]

The 2/13th Battalion (under Colonel Frederick Burrows) eventually came out 'on its own steam', Sergeant John Oates (2/8th Field Battery) noted, regarding itself as the 'lucky AIF unit.'[12]

* * *

After the failure of Operation *Battleaxe* to link with up the garrison in mid-June, Auchinleck concentrated on assembling an impressive striking force to again attempt to relieve the fortress and destroy Rommel's armour. Zero hour was set before dawn on 18 November. Both sides suffered heavy losses in the ensuing fighting. The 19th New Zealand Brigade briefly linked up with the garrison on 27 November, before Tobruk was isolated again in a bloody, see-sawing contest.

'Tiger' was the name assigned to a large German stronghold two and a half miles beyond Post 49. 'It was a tough nut to crack', one of the last 'Rats' still inside the fortress wrote in admiration of a fallen Black Watch piper.

... it was our privilege to watch the action the Scotties fought when ordered to draw Tiger's fangs. It was a stirring spectacle highlighted by the valour of a Highland piper who gave his life at this spot. We watched the Jocks forming up one afternoon in December 1941 ... Here and there in the ranks pipers could be seen waiting for the signal to play their comrades into battle. At 3 p.m. our guns opened up on Tiger and above their horrible din we heard the rousing skirl of the pipes as the advance commenced. Some of us felt like going out and joining the Jocks. The noise of the heavy German air bursts brought us back to reality as the Scotties began to fall, never to rise again. My attention was concentrated on a six feet six inches piper. As he marched into this carnage he appeared as though he was going shopping. Suddenly I saw a large black smudge over his head and heard a terrific explosion. He fell to the ground. His legs had been sliced off below the knees by shrapnel. Two of our stretcher bearers raced to pick him up, but he waved them back. Then he recovered his pipes and started to play a famous Highland tune. The music gradually diminished in volume. Then it stopped only to start again on two occasions. At the third try we saw him lie back

slowly. The music left the pipes and a brave Scot passed into the shadows. The Jocks took Tiger and when darkness came we had a job to detach the piper's lifeless fingers that still clutched his beloved bagpipes.[13]

In the end, British and South African troops re-established contact with Tobruk on 1 December, though a week passed before Rommel finally ordered his forces to withdraw, thus ending the 242-day siege. Unable to hold Cyrenaica against stronger Allied forces, the so-called 'Desert Fox' was forced to retreat.

Casualties in the 9th Division from 8 April to 25 October totalled 749 killed, 1,996 wounded and 604 taken prisoner. While under the temporary command of the British 70th Division, the 2/13th Battalion lost 39 men killed and 36 wounded.

* * *

'Tears filled the eyes of many women' as incapacitated Tobruk veterans arrived for the Reinforcement Week recruiting drive in Martin Place, Sydney, in November 1941. 'Some of the soldiers', Sydney's *Sun* reported,

shook hands with the left hand, because the right was in bandages. Others stumbled up the steps of the platform on crutches and had to be helped the last part of the way. One became ill before the rally began and had to be carried to the recruiting hut.[14]

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Egypt – ‘The Aussies are back’

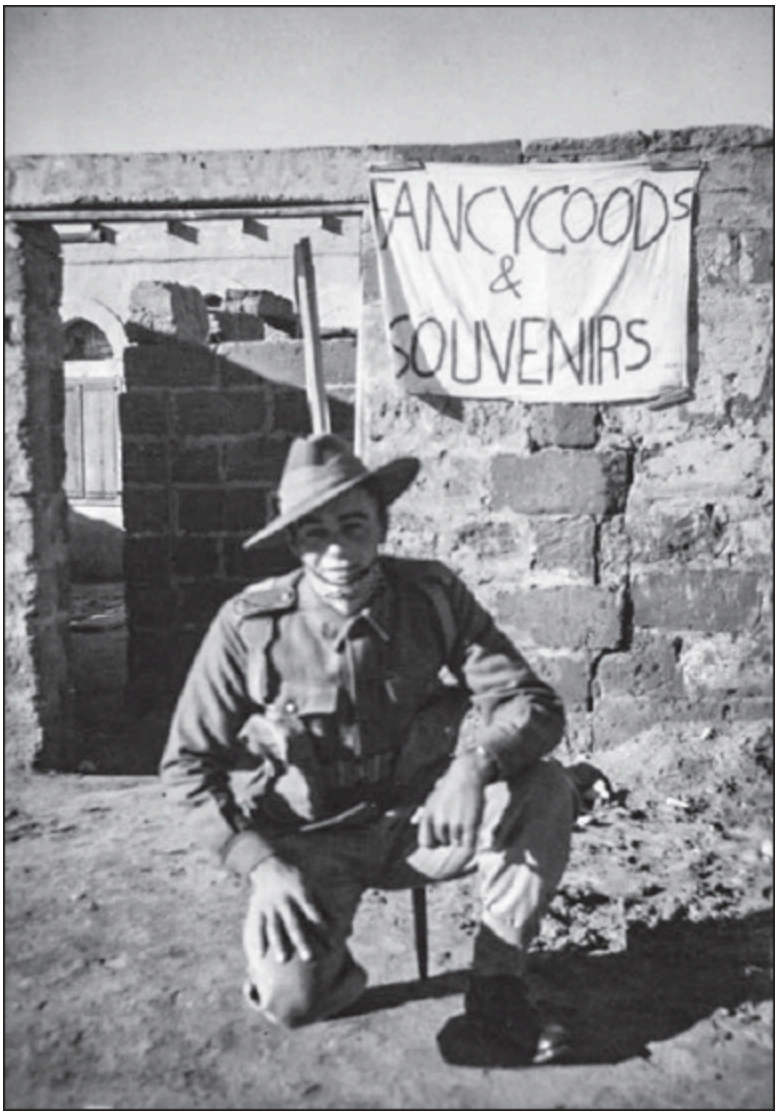
The ‘Rats’ could rest. Australian troops brought out of Tobruk by sea were disembarked at Alexandria before transferring to Palestine. A welcome relief after ten months in the desert, camp amenities provided a ‘lavish issue of beer’ and assorted luxuries from the Australian Comforts Fund. Day leave to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was offered, with Cairo an option for soldiers with sufficient pay credits. Training resumed in due course for the re-equipped battalions, remembering how the 9th Division was originally committed to operations in Cyrenaica only partially trained. The 2/13th Battalion eventually re-joined its parent formation (9th Division) on 20 December – ‘the lads gave us a great welcome, and everyone seemed pleased to see us meet up with them again’, Aubrey Clarke celebrated.[1]

Christmas card sent by Private Ron Searle (2/43rd Battalion), a Glenelg milk vendor, to his wife Ina. (State Library of South Australia B 70024/45)

Three 2/43rd Battalion soldiers enjoy a drink in a Tel Aviv café. A later note on back of the photo by Lance Corporal Noel Errington (centre) reads: 'Tel-aviv. It's pretty hot and dusty where I am now, and I wouldn't mind if I had a few of those bottles to wash the dust down with.' (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/597)

'We all thought of you folks at home and drank a toast to you all'

'Christmas is almost upon us', Cloncurry's *Advocate* attested; 'What a year for eventful happenings it has been.'[2] Similar to the beginning of the year when the Italians were swept back almost into Tripoli, so too had Rommel been forced to retire west toward the Libyan capital. Australian troops were earlier driven out of Greece and Crete while troops, mainly from the 7th Division, had helped to crush Vichy French forces in Syria. Hitler had boldly entered Russia and later declared war on the US after Japan's pre-emptive strike on the US Pacific Fleet at anchor in Pearl Harbor and simultaneous attacks on the Philippines, Hong Kong, Guam and the Malay Peninsula. The upheaval in the Pacific brought the war to Australia's doorstep. Japanese aircraft first attacked Darwin on 19 February 1942 in a devastating raid. Broome was hit two weeks later. Would invasion follow?



Outside a ‘tourist’ shop in Khassa, Palestine. Receiving a pair of mittens from 8-year-old Ronald Adams of Port Pirie, Private Albert Drummond sent a carved souvenir camel with a note: ‘I promised myself that I would send you a souvenir of Palestine, and here it is. It is nothing much but then, I am only a poor married man with four children.’ (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/584)

Auchinleck’s Middle East command – including the 6th and 7th Australian Infantry Divisions – was tapped to stop Tokyo’s inexorable march across Southeast Asia. The 9th Division was ordered to relieve the 7th Division in parts of northern Syria and Lebanon – an operational area encompassing more than 1,200 square miles. Morshead’s ‘seasoned veterans’, correspondent Russel Hill cabled, would guard the Turkish–Syrian border, ‘awaiting any attack that the Germans may make against Lebanon.’ The ‘Rats’ were digging in again, not in the desert, ‘but in a country of wheat fields, olive groves, and snow-covered mountains.’[3]

Should Hitler attempt to push through Turkey (now Türkiye), delaying actions would be fought along the frontier, with the defence hinging on a system of fortresses, including Tripoli in northern Lebanon. Here the 'Rats' would put their recent defensive expertise into practice.[4]

But for the moment there were other priorities. 'For the first time in their lives Australian soldiers in Syria will see ... snow-draped mountains, with thousands of pine trees studding the slopes', Sergeant Kenneth May (2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion) wrote in Broken Hill's *Barrier Miner*: 'I think even the most unsentimental, unimaginative will recall the Christmas stories of his childhood.'[5] Corporal Malcolm McLeod (2/13th Field Company), a truck driver from Greenough (WA) enjoyed 'a good Xmas not far from Damascus', a veritable feast after earlier privations, featuring roast turkey, plum pudding and sauce, 'topped off with good Aussie beer'. 'We all thought of you folks at home and drank a toast to you all, and we expressed the hope to be home for Xmas 1942 if not before.'[6]

Greatcoated Diggers stopping for a smoke and snowball fight. Syria 1942 (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

A heavy snowstorm arrived to blanket the region in white. A novelty to many troops, it gave rise to an order prohibiting the 'practice of throwing

loose snow at WD [War Department] vehicles, either stationary or in motion.'[7] Private William Hall, a Brisbane clerk in training with the 1st Australian Corp Skiing School, ventured out in his 'duck-egg green' windproof clothing, looking 'quite a sight out in the snow ... We had three days of strenuous training. I fell over dozens of times but fortunately the snow was very soft. We're getting used to different snow conditions now.' (Returning to Australia with the 2/31st Battalion, Hall died from wounds received on 9 November 1942 in New Guinea.) New to the sport, Private Thomas Trish (2/48th Battalion), a labourer from Naracoorte (SA), enjoyed skiing, though a bout of snow blindness put him 'out of action for about a week.'[8]

Slouch hats and ski poles in Syria. Herbert 'Bert' Johnston, ex-Sturt footballer, and Cecil 'Zac' Humphris (2/48th Battalion) outside a Cedars hotel, Lebanon, in February 1942. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Conditions 'were filthy when the thaw set in', Corporal Horace 'Horrie' Hocking, a Bendigo (Vic.) clerk told his friends, the 'weather still boisterous with the wind bitterly cold. Five blankets, a sleeping bag and a

greatcoat are none too much covering at night. When on guard we are rugged up like bears.'[9]

The Syrian occupation offered fresh fodder for dilettante travel writers. Gunner Thomas Stanley (3rd Anti-Tank Regiment), from Merrylands (NSW), marvelled at a 'beautiful red sunrise, with the snow-capped mountains in the background – it's really a beautiful sight.' Private Douglas Mickan (2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion), a Renmark (SA) labourer, could lay claim to having seen Turkey: 'I have not really been into the country but was on the border ... This was the first strip of decent timbered country I had seen over here.' (Later captured by the Japanese on Java, Mickan survived the infamous Thai–Burma railway.)[10]

Columnist Captain David McNicoll (7th Division Cavalry Regiment) was struck by the mere 'presence of Australian troops on leave at Aleppo. Australians at Aleppo! Just think. Men from Cooma, and Ryde, and unpronounceable country towns, spending a leave in Aleppo, a place few of them had heard of before the invasion of Syria.'[11]

'I am in the Middle East', 39-year-old Private Robert 'Jumbo' McGuire (2/32nd Battalion), a tractor driver from Brookton (WA), replied in appreciation of a package from home. 'Claiming to be first and only full-blooded Aboriginal to enlist in WA', McGuire found it,

funny to have Christmas in the wintertime. When I first saw the people over here, I thought of my Sunday School days. All the folks over here dress just the same as when Christ was on earth, and to see men plough the ground with a single furrow plough, and a camel pulling it. The children go out and work just about as soon as they can walk. When I go on parade I see these kids going off to work in the morning. Oh well, I hope the people of the Brookton district have good crops ...[12]

Born on 19 August 1904, Private Robert 'Jumbo' McGuire was honoured with a special invitation to attend a Garden Party at Government House (WA) in 1954 in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II. McGuire also received a Coronation Medal and seat at the event. He passed away on 11 August 1957 in Murray, WA. (NAA B883, WX14234)

AIF 'sightseer', Driver George Allison (2/1st Battalion) discovered a cosmopolitan city of 400,000 people. 'Electric trams run in the city', the Newcastle railway porter noted, 'although they are fairly ancient pieces of work.'

There are half a dozen picture theatres and we saw some good shows while there. With English pictures the speech is English, with French and Arabic printed underneath ... Different classes of food are obtainable in the cafes, including frogs, one lot which I sampled; but they didn't entice me to sample them again. They are all right as long as you can keep your minds off frog ponds.[13]

The men of the 9th Division, however, would soon be returning to bully beef and biscuits in a far less salubrious setting.

'A fateful battle is looming'

The pendulum of the desert war had swung in Britain's favour at the end of 1941. But victory brought the burden of extended communication and supply lines, now stretching all the way to Suez. Rommel, conversely, was now much closer to his own points of supply. Reinforced and replenished by convoys chaperoned by U-Boats and Luftwaffe air patrols, he knew – thanks to an intelligence windfall – of his superiority in front line armour. Duping the British into believing otherwise, he launched a new offensive on 21 January 1942, catching the British Eighth Army off guard, and forcing it to fall back towards the Egyptian frontier. In confused fighting over a wide desert area, the 'Second Benghazi Handicap' or 'Gazala Gallop' was run. One of Rommel's officers observed, with some irony, how 'the same Arabs [in Benghazi] who a few weeks previously had fired without cause after the retreating Germans now greeted them enthusiastically, waving the Green flag of the Prophet and throwing us plundered German rations.'[14]

In a nod delivered at the House of Commons, Churchill paid tribute to a 'daring and skilful opponent'. Such an accolade was 'fully deserved' in the eyes of an Adelaide *Advertiser* correspondent, who foresaw the fate of the campaign,

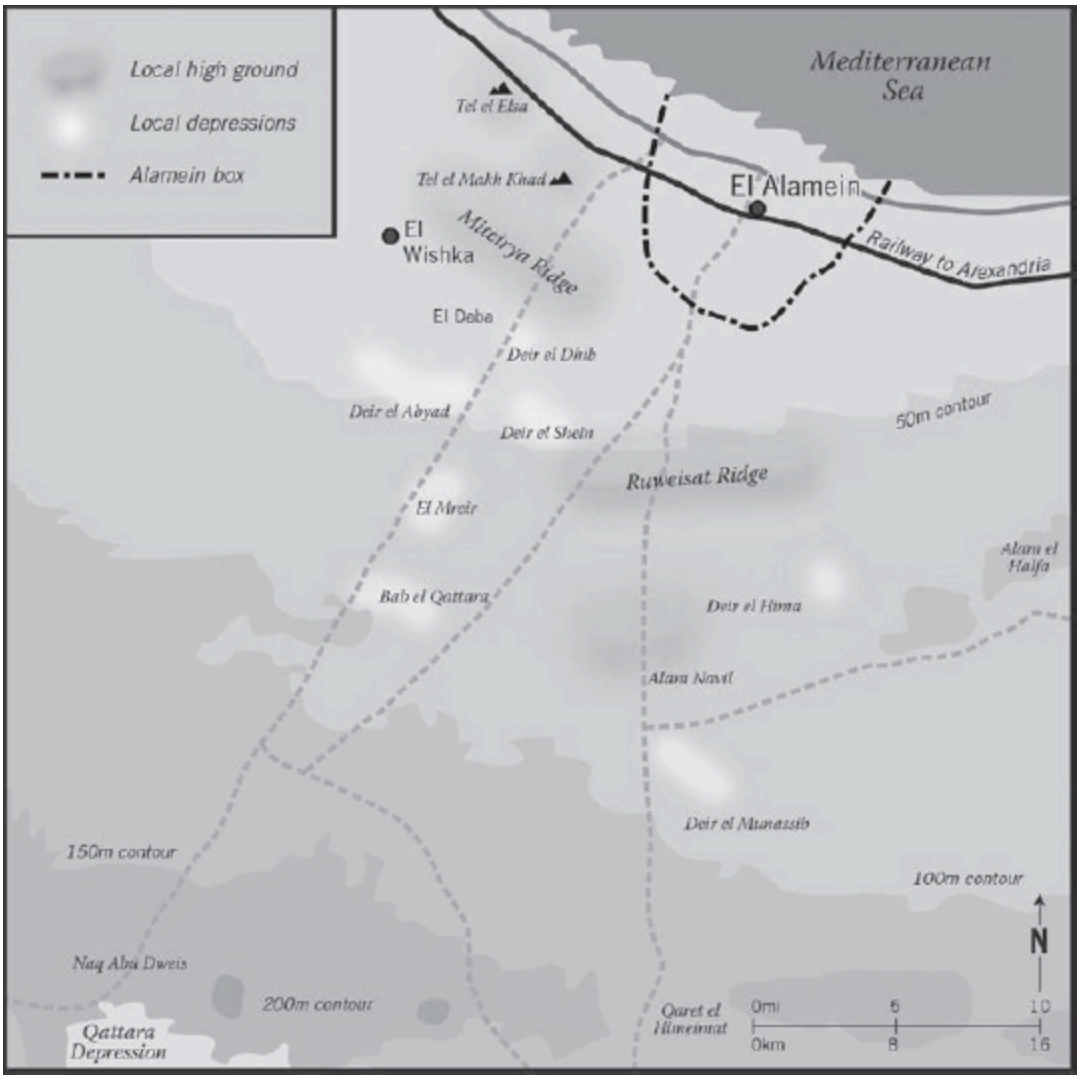
primarily determined by the degree of destruction wrought by one enemy force upon another ... for as strategists have pointed out since the beginning, no decisive outcome can come until the Germans reach Mersa Matruh or the British reach Tripoli. Until then the campaign must remain in suspense ... in short, the Libyan campaign must continue in a state of chronic uncertainty until the effective striking power of one army or the other is destroyed.[15]

Halting midway along the Cyrenaica 'Bulge', British troops took up positions along a new defensive line, the so-called Gazala Line, stretching from the coast at Gazala to Bir Hacheim. While Churchill prodded Auchinleck to resume the offensive, Rommel once again pre-empted his opponent, dealing the first strike. On 26 May, amid a fierce sandstorm, he steered his tanks around the southern end of the Gazala defences in an audacious outflanking drive. Bitter fighting ensued, with heavy losses on both sides, though no side would land a decisive blow. Bursting through the British defences, Rommel set his sights on Tobruk – the dilapidated fortress now under the command of South Africa's General Hendrik Klopper. Mirroring events in 1941, the citadel's new occupants, correspondent Alan

Moorehead recapped, were ‘bundled pell-mell into the fortress at the last moment … tired and hungry and embittered from their setbacks of the past five days.’[16]

Rommel’s assailing force, his strongest to date, smashed through the perimeter defences on the morning of 20 June. Tobruk capitulated the following morning in one of the worst British defeats of the war. News of the downfall shocked Australian infantrymen, fiercely proud of their epic stand. Corporal Don Perkins, whom we last saw leaving Tobruk on a doomed hospital ship, took ‘the loss of Tobruk as a personal affront’, longing for the time when his division could ‘avenge it’.[17] In his official history, Barton Maughan writes: ‘To some it seemed that their efforts, and those of lost comrades, had gone for nought. Some commanders addressed their men in an effort to combat their sombre mood.’[18] It was a disaster that left a ‘nasty taste’, *Uralla Times* advanced; ‘Rommel appears to have played his cards the better.’[19] An embittered Churchill vented: ‘defeat is one thing; disgrace is another.’[20]

Flushed with success, the newly promoted German field marshal again eyed the Nile Delta. Both Hitler and Mussolini backed Rommel’s urge to push on in pursuit of retreating British columns. Auchinleck decided not to hold Mersa Matruh, which fell to Axis troops on 29 June, while Lord Haw Haw informed the world there were no Australians left in Egypt to save Britain. Instead, Auchinleck chose to stand and fight further east, at a dusty railhead known as ‘El Alamein’ – a narrow ‘last ditch’ position, between the coast and the impassable Qattara Depression, standing before before the Egyptian capital.



El Alamein – gateway to Alexandria, Cairo and the Suez Canal

A battlefield précis appeared in the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, since 'its physical features may well play an important part in the offensive and defensive operations'.

Alamein, in itself a place of no especial importance, is situated on the railway and road which a few miles inland follows the coast from Alexandria nearly to Tobruk. The coastal road is the only road in the area that is suitable for heavy wheeled traffic. The coastal belt is a featureless undulating plain of red earth dotted with scrub around which the wind has piled drift sand in dunes which make the terrain difficult for mechanical transport.[21]

‘A fateful battle is looming about 65 miles west of Alexandria’, *The West Australian* signalled. ‘Whether Rommel can be held here must depend on General Auchinleck’s race against time with the armoured and other reinforcements which are reported to be pouring across the desert from as far distant as Syria.’[22] It was here the 9th Division would fight its second desert campaign.

Back in Katoomba (NSW), a tourist agent received a letter from a soldier advising that a business sign advertising ‘Megalong Valley, 2.30 p.m.: 4 seats vacant’, and souvenired when his unit marched through the town, was now a feature erected in the desert, ‘the original wording still legible.’[23]

‘Things are not going as I should like them’

A message couriered to Morshead, then in Cairo, on 27 June notified him of the 9th Division’s transfer to the northern sector of Auchinleck’s El Alamein line. The move came as a surprise to Sergeant William Prideaux (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment), a butcher from Boulder (WA). ‘None of us thought that we would leave Syria to come back into the desert’, he recalled, ‘as we had all had big ideas that the next move would be the boat for home.’[24] Sergeant Tom ‘Diver’ Derrick (2/48th Battalion), an Adelaide labourer and keen amateur sportsman, likewise diarised (on 30 June) an air of disappointment; ‘we all thought we were homeward bound ... all the boys took it calmly and have no doubt they will give another splendid account of themselves.’[25]

An AIF convoy crossing the Sinai desert, July 1942. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Subterfuge concealed the division's move to Egypt, a 'drama in itself ', Warrant Officer Alexander Renton (2/23rd Battalion) told.

A sudden move at dawn, a casual drive through the beautiful Syrian countryside towards the Turkish border, and then a dramatic switch south gave our troops the first inkling that something big was brewing. Aussie hats were hidden, AIF [identity] discs taken off vehicles, and the well-known Australia badges kept out of sight, and the stage was set for the creation of the greatest set of furpheys ever thought of. We were going to England, we were driving to India, we were not going anywhere – these and a thousand other tales kept the minds of the troops active, but the greatest, the wildest, the most popular of all rumours was that we were heading for home sweet home. Some of us knew the desert was our destination, and we liked the idea not at all, but it was impossible not to like the beauty, the drama, and the mystery of our dash through the Middle East ... Over the canal, through Ismailia and on to the Delta went the speeding convoy, and the hopes of going home crashed sadly. The troops were tired and their spirits were low, but an order to restore their hats and their badges and to make themselves as Australian as true Aussies ever were worked wonders. We were to make a pep drive through Cairo, where Arab morale was not the best. Surely that drive must have been one of the most memorable in Cairo's history. With war in its grimmest form almost at the city's front door, you can imagine the electrifying effect that the sight and sound of truckloads of cheering, whistling, laughing Aussies had on the despondent

population, especially the Europeans. I can see now the crowds rushing from shops and homes, the excited bobbing of heads from windows, the hysterical waving of women, the raised hats of the men. I can hear now the amazed cry that became a jubilant roar, 'The Aussies are back' the repeated shouts of the Jumping Frenchmen, 'Vive Aussies!' and above all the noise could be heard the jokes and laughter of our men as they moved on to battle.[26]

Scenes of panic had earlier erupted in Cairo's European quarter following Tobruk's surrender. The RN beat a hasty retreat from Alexandria to the safety of the Red Sea, scores of Europeans chose to flee to Palestine, and sensitive British military documents were destroyed in an anxious incineration christened 'Ash Wednesday'. The journey to the front, the 9th Division recorded, was one 'few will forget' as 'opposing traffic moved nose to tail in one continuous stream of tanks, guns, armoured and trucks', a logjam at times lasting hours that, thankfully, escaped the attention of enemy aircraft.[27]

Passing the pyramids en route to the frontline. (Australian Army Museum of Western Australia)

Turning to verse, a gunner and his crew chewed over events:

'Alamein'

The Tommies they were desperate.
Jerry had them on the run.

And every trick in the blue so far
Had been taken by the Hun.
In the midst of this depression
Of spirits filled with gloom,
Some bright lad had a brain wave.
We'll fetch Aussies up 'Ba Goom'.
If there's anyone to halt them
Now that things are so damn crook.
It's the lads who held and beat them,
And stacked them in Tobruk.
So [General] Ritchie wired to Morshead,
Bring up your pack of thieves.
For Rommel and his Panzers
Are fair giving me the heaves.
Now we're sitting in our funk holes
Dodging shrapnel and lumps of lead;
Scuttling down like rabbits
When there's Stukas overhead.[28]

* * *

Privy to enemy intentions via Ultra intelligence, surprise was absent on 1 July 1942 when Rommel – later acknowledging that 'both officers and men [had] reached the limit of human endurance' – deployed his war-worn *Panzerarmee*.[29] Clouds of sand whirled across the seat of war in what became known as the First Battle of Alamein – the apex of Rommel's African adventure. Decimated by illness, struggling with a matériel deficit and reliant upon a miscellany of captured equipment, his 90th Light Afrika Division was halted by South African artillery in its attempt to push northeast along the coastal road. Panic broke out among the overtaxed combat veterans, with the German war diary registering: 'the attack has broken down under the concentrated enemy fire.'[30] The 21st Panzer Division, however, was more successful in assaulting Indian troops defending the Deir el Shein (defensive) 'box', a cause for optimism in Rommel's book – though the loss of tanks now blunted the DAK's offensive capability, which was all the while critically short of fuel and

ammunition. Crucially, the ‘Desert Fox’ had failed to outmanoeuvre the British; a crushing battle of attrition would ensue.

Rommel’s plans for the second day of fighting called for the Alamein ‘box’ to be isolated and the coast road opened. But staunch resistance, repeated Allied air attacks and replenishment challenges saw only modest gains. Enemy morale began to ebb; Captain Kleiböhmer, diary keeper for the 90th Light Afrika Division, feared that his fellow ‘Afrikaners’ were no longer up to the task of taking ‘this last British stronghold forward of the Nile Delta by themselves’. Italian formations, so far largely removed from the fighting, offered a ‘last hope’, though little was expected. Rommel attempted to push around the Alamein box on 3 July. Although some headway was made at Ruweisat Ridge, New Zealand troops mauled the Italian *Ariete* Division, which lost 531 men and several artillery batteries. His position increasingly perilous, Rommel confided to his wife: ‘Things are not going as I should like them’.[31]

A warning sign to the unwary at El Alamein. (Author's collection)

Morshead met with Auchinleck at his headquarters, steadfast in his belief that Australian brigades were not to be pulled apart for piecemeal deployment. After a tense discussion, it was agreed the 9th Division – the only available battle-hardened formation – would be brought forward as a whole under Morshead's command as soon as practicable. Gunner Ian Fullerton (2/8th Field Regiment) shared news of the division's transfer with his parents back in Mentone (Vic.), adding, 'we have a lot, to avenge, and it will be to a finish.' Fullerton's thoughts also turned to the approaching battle. And to survival.

We are about to move up into action again. Everything is ready, and the order to move should come before nightfall. Things are looking very grave up front ... It is rather trying, sitting here waiting to move in. Everybody is laughing and joking, but underneath it all is the undercurrent of strain – not fear, but the anticipation of an ordeal like we have been through before ... more severe perhaps. Each man is secretly wondering whether he will come through. We shut our minds from the thoughts of what is coming and talk about other things, but it comes drifting back. Our thoughts at these times go to those things each man holds dear . . . Should anything happen to me don't grieve, I'll have gone happily doing my job as a man and as you would have me go.[32]

The Australians were given the task of securing the high ground (between the coast and the rail line) named Tel el Eisa ('Hill of Jesus'), also referred to as Hill 33. Battalions moved up to the assembly areas after last light on 9 July. Under intermittent enemy fire, Bombardier Keith Worthley (2/7th Field Regiment), a tailor from Fitzroy (SA), moved into position and dug in, 'ready to fire at 4.30 in the morning.'

Right on the tick the balloon went up and boy, oh boy, it was on in a big way. It was an inspiring sight alright; every gun they could muster was firing away like blue blazes and Jerry was caught napping – but not for long.[33]

Rommel marshalled the bulk of his forces to the south for a forthcoming drive, leaving mainly Italian troops in the firing line. The 2/48th Battalion tackled the *Sabratha* Division. 'The first two attacks went like clockwork', Sergeant William Prideaux expanded,

and in a very short time prisoners were passing to the back of the line. One chap had his pyjamas on and I went over to him, but they were of very poor quality so I let him have them. Before long the boys were searching them, but most of them were as poor as crows. I managed to get a few things. Well, folks, we got our guns in and waited ...[34]

Rommel later condescendingly wrote of his allies 'throwing away arms and ammunition as they ran.' In separate actions, tanks from the Italian *Trieste* Division attacked the 2/24th Battalion while Bersaglieri troops moved on positions near Tel el Eisa railway station. The enemy armour, Prideaux detailed,

paraded up and down out of range wanting us to fire so they could spot our guns and then their mortars would commence to blow us out of the ground. Neither we nor the infantry fired so the tanks made off to our right flank. The last tanks came within range of our gun and were promptly set on fire.[35]

Sergeant Tom 'Diver' Derrick (2/48th Battalion), whom we last saw leaving Syria, was in the thick of the fighting. He stormed and captured three Italian machine gun nests near the Hill of Jesus and was personally responsible for capturing 100 enemy troops. Later the same night, he knocked out two German tanks using sticky bombs.[36]

Private Douglas Naughton (2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion), a Tumut (NSW) labourer, was killed by a mortar bomb the next day. Proud to have been his 'cobber', Private Richard Riddell, a cabinetmaker from Sydney, reminisced in a letter to Naughton's mother how the pair had enlisted on the same day; 'we had our last leave together in Beirut and Doug kept me in order'. (Riddell was later killed on 6 December 1943 in New Guinea.)[37]

Taken together, over 1,000 prisoners were bagged, several guns were destroyed, and 18 tanks were knocked out or hopelessly bogged. A remarkable win also came with the 2/24th Battalion's capture of Captain Alfred Seebohm's 621st Radio Intercept Company – Rommel's crack radio intelligence unit. Seized files revealed lax radio security and a spy ring operating in Egypt. 'Absolutely furious' upon receiving the news, Rommel was at once dependent upon his own instinct and the eyes of his forward reconnaissance units.[38]

‘This is home, somewhere in the Western Desert’, a Digger scrawled on the back of this photo, his dug out at El Alamein equipped with a salvaged Vickers K machine gun. (State Library of South Australia SRG 435/2/477)

Enemy attacks in the coastal sector were again repulsed. ‘Everything he had he flung in’, Warrant Officer Class 1 James ‘Jimmy’ Nicoll (2/24th Battalion) wrote, ‘shells, mortar bombs, machine gun fire, dive bombers, tanks, lorried infantry, till long after dark. All to no purpose.’[39] Two Luftwaffe pilots fared no better. ‘Crouched in a highly inadequate communication trench’, Australian correspondent Kenneth Slessor doubtless slunk as:

eight Messerschmitts of the latest Me109F design swooped in from the sea, lashing the road with bullets. On their tails came a most beautiful sight – two of our own Kittyhawks in hot pursuit. Machine-guns hammered rapidly in the clouds, and a few whistles and zips at the side of the trench kept our faces to the sand. It was all over in five minutes. Outside the sheds of El Alamein railway station a spout of black smoke swept into the sky from an aircraft which had just come down in flames. A few minutes later I saw another machine plunging and twisting, tail over nose, about a mile away. Smoke, black and furious, began to climb up in a great pillar almost before it had smashed into the stony face of the desert.[40]

Supported by Ju 87 dive-bombing and artillery, Rommel steered the 21st Panzer Division and motorised infantry south of the Alamein Box on 13 July, aiming to seize the position and isolate the Australians. The German 104th Infantry Regiment fought a furious battle. 'In the midst of this', Melbourne's *Age* elaborated, Corporal Victor Knight (2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion) helped to see off the attack, 'calmly picking out targets' and moving his guns seven times in the face of heavy mortar and machine gun fire.[41] Knight himself recalled having to 'urinate on the barrels to keep them cool enough to keep firing. We had oil available, and we simply poured it from a four-gallon drum into the working parts, keeping the guns firing all the time.'[42] The German regiment pulled back that night, leaving hundreds of dead behind.

Corporal Alan Coe (2/24th Battalion), whom we met in the introduction, fought alongside the 2/43rd Battalion in a 'stunt along the coastal area and the Hill of Jesus'.

This was the first 'go forward' action for us, because – as you will remember – all our work in Tobruk was in defence. Well, our first stunt was a grand success: we gained about six miles of an important ridge, captured over a thousand Italian and Hun prisoners, four big field guns and quite a lot of small stuff, for the loss of about three casualties. My company never had a casualty. After we had gained our objective, it wasn't long before the Hun put over his first counterattack, and I can tell you he was very anxious to regain the lost ground. We had a very tiring and hot time for the first few days till he gave up the idea of pushing us out by attacking. He put over six attacks on our positions in almost as many days. Each time he had lots of infantry supported by tanks; and the first couple of days he also put over a few Stuka parades – as many as 30 planes sometimes.[43]

General Leslie Morshead (left) and Lieutenant Colonel Heathcote Hammer (2/48th Battalion) watch a Stuka raid. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Kenneth Slessor again lay prone, ‘in some particularly choice and boiling sand just inside the Alamein wire’, watching enemy dive-bombers and fighters cross overhead in search of targets. In reply, ‘a complete orchestra of Bofors guns cracked and banged continuously, while just above horizontal ear-level there was the soft spit of machine-gun bullets bedding themselves in the sand.’[44] Driver William Dixon (2/101st General Transport Company), a hotel porter from Cessnock (NSW), was also ‘grovelling down in the dirt’,

when his Stukas came over with their screamers on ... They start from very high up and then come diving down with, the siren going full belt. It is the most frightening sound imaginable. You would swear he was coming right into bed with you. Then you hear him pull out, and the crump, crump of the bombs exploding, and you heave a great sigh ... After a few raids one can tell whether they are close by the whistle of the bombs. I always kept my head down just in case my hearing is crook.[45]

The desert’s harsh glare meant that aircraft were usually heard before seen, the bright sunlight rendering identification difficult. ‘It is not a very pleasant experience being attacked from the air ... the steel helmet – well,

it's like a straw decker', Trooper Eric Billingham (9th Division Cavalry) confessed in an amusing missive.

We were travelling along when down came the Stukas. There was no cover, it being bare ground near a salt lake. There was nothing else to do but jump in and this we did – without any hesitation. If you could have seen the four salted herrings who crawled out later, you would have died laughing – each looked at the other and had a good laugh. I feel sure Jerry had a grin on his face as he flew past. One of the boys said, 'it's better to be pickled than buried.'[46]

Equally conscious of the threat from above, Driver Cecil Earl discovered just how 'quickly you can get down a hole when the raids start.' Writing of conditions in the front line, Earl staved off boredom by fashioning an 'ashtray out of a 25-pounder shell and carving a map on it.'

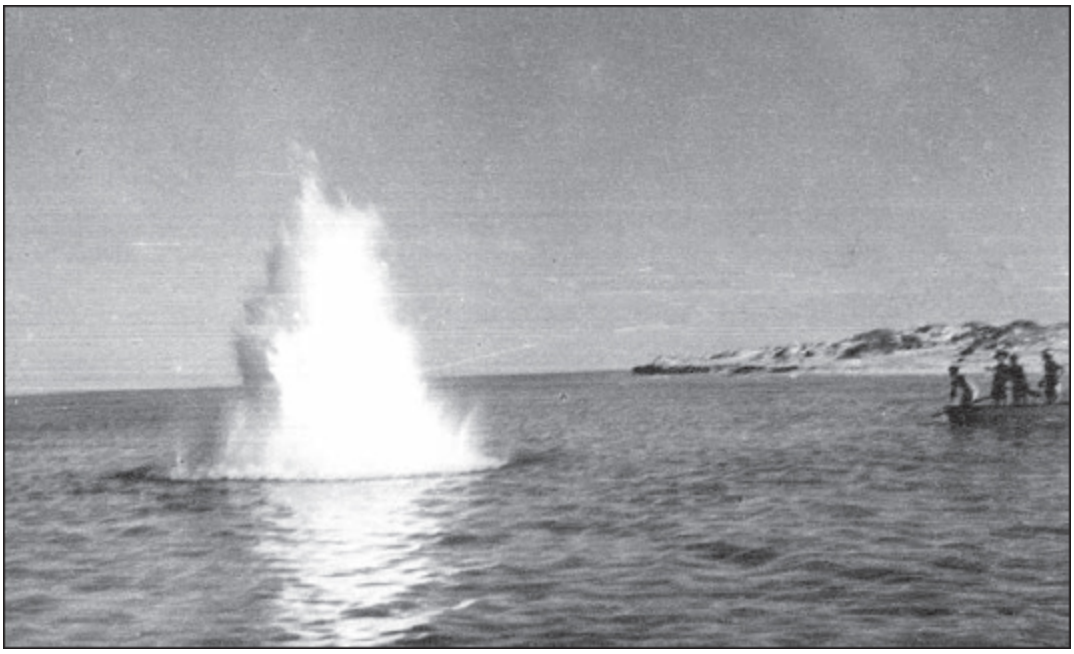
I am also making serviette rings out of two other shells. A chap must do something to pass the time away as I have not had much work to do lately except a few repairs to trucks.[47]

'Fortunately, I am hardly ever without something to do', Gunner Ronald Pitt (2/8th Field Regiment) mentioned, 'whether it's work, study (both ICS and Army), letter writing, washing and mending clothes, going down to the beach for a swim, or even just reading an interesting book.'[48]

By the waters of the Mediterranean, 'dyed an astonishing blue by the intensive sky', war correspondent Kenneth Slessor passed 'a half-moon of clean, white beach',

which, with its bursting foam and swarms of naked brown Australian bodies, might have been another Bondi beach, except that few of the swimmers wore trunks and most of the loungers wore steel helmets (and nothing else).[49]

The Mediterranean also offered a change in diet. After Corporal Jos Trezise (2/8th Field Ambulance), a Tumby Bay (SA) truck driver, and his mates spotted 'a few fish' they speedily returned with 'some gelignite and tried to blow them up', though with not 'much luck, except for two small trevally.'[50]



‘Fishing’ in the Mediterranean. Improvised nets made from empty petrol tins and camouflage netting were another non-explosive fishing technique. ‘In between skirmishes’, Sydney’s *Daily Mirror* reported, the ‘one that got away’ was a ‘new topic of conversation in the sunbaked desert.’ (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

A dip in ‘Musso’s Lake’ (as one Digger termed it), was not without danger as Corporal Trevor Westerman (2/9th Cavalry Regiment), a Ballarat bank clerk, discovered.

... strangely enough, in the distance, you can see Fritz and Co. happily splashing on their beach, while our boys splash on ours. They have a sort of gentlemen’s agreement to leave one another alone while swimming. But some Fritz gunners recently weren’t gentlemen and turned on a real ‘Beachy Bill’ act, so ours replied in kind, and it was on for a couple of days, *mafeesh* [‘no more’] swim for either side. But the ruffled tempers are smoothed down now, and the swims are peaceful once more. It’s a funny sort of a game, and won’t last long, I’m sure.[51]

Ronald Pitt also shared the tale of a recalcitrant German POW challenging his captors: ‘You can’t fool us. We know there are no Australians left here. You’re only wearing those badges to try and frighten us’! In a similar vein, Cecil Earl related how ‘others could not believe their eyes to see Aussies still in the Middle East, and after our boys brought in the first big batch of prisoners, they reckoned we worked with charms.’[52]

Italian POWs file into captivity, July 1942. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Previously wounded in Tobruk, Sergeant Donald McPherson (2/7th Field Company) observed a change in prisoner demeanour.

At first they were all arrogantly sure of victory. Even the wounded look at you as if you were dirt. But later, though the younger ones were still 'cocky', the older men were less sure of themselves, and the prisoners from the El Alamein front were a sorry lot – filthy, unshaven, emaciated, their clothes tattered. It was quite a change to see Jerries that way. They had had three months of really appalling conditions – much worse than we had to put up with, and, though we had plenty of food and sufficient water it was no picnic for us. And the blitzing they got from the RAF [and USAAF] was probably the toughest any troops have had to take in this war. After 48 hours of it, nearly all the prisoners rounded up were 'bomb-happy' – half crazy with hysteria, there was hardly a foot of ground not blasted to pieces.[53]

On a lighter note, Private James Sherry (2/24th Battalion) bared details of the time he was ordered to bring 'seven Jerry prisoners back',

... I grabbed a tommy-gun and in my most charming manner inquired if the gentlemen would mind preceding me. They just looked, grinned and took their time all the way, no matter how I swore at them. I couldn't make it out and was boiling mad by the time I got them to the appointed place, where I

handed them over to the guards. As I turned to go they laughed aloud. I was still trying to puzzle it all out on my way back, when I suddenly discovered that there was no magazine in my gun! I wasn't game to tell the boys for days![54]

'A living hell of fire'

'Aeroplanes add to the spice of life', 35-year-old Gunner Leo Cheers (4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment) rhapsodised to his young daughter in Long Jetty (NSW).

We have plenty. I've seen ninety go over head at the one time – and Jerry isn't short, either. It's a thrilling sight to see anything from twelve to thirty Boston Bombers flying in formation – grim, relentless, determined, their minds set on one object – with fighter planes around and above, weaving in and out like kites in the wind. Some are so high they are hardly discernible to the naked eye; and in comparison, with the bombers, their speed and manoeuvrability are things to wonder at. Then one sees the return – pride, success, nonchalance, written in their every line (that's the bombers), while the fighters remind me of cheeky little cock-sparrows, afraid of nothing, itching for a peck at something. All that's so matter of fact; no haste, no discord – a puppet show – with the aeroplanes as puppets, and a master hand pulling the strings according to plan and preconceived pattern – but it's not always so. One is startled at times by the violent throbbing of planes near at hand and low. Hedgehoppers they are, almost skimming the ground, flying below telegraph wires (if there are any about), over a rise and on top of you before you can say 'Jack Robinson', and going like the 'hammers of hell' always. Maybe, they're ours, returning from a raid with empty 'ammo' belts; maybe it's a dog fight; maybe it's the enemy strafing or seeking pictures of our lines – whatever it is, it's always thrilling as a spectacle.[55]

Manning a captured Italian Breda 20-mm anti-aircraft gun. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

It was also deadly. In his second day of combat, Gunner Henry 'Harry' Cribb (2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment), a labourer from Tumut (NSW), brought down a twin-engine German bomber (possibly a Ju 88 destroyed on 14 July) – 'quite a feat for a light A/A gun', a fellow gunner wrote in admiration. Described as a quiet and unassuming individual, Cribb died 'a soldier and a man' on the evening of 17 July. Gunner Arthur Rees (also injured in the incident) wrote to Cribb's mother – the 'hardest letter I have ever written in my life' – to explain the circumstances of her son's death.

... we were all sitting around the gun talking. Without warning, a shell got a direct hit on our gun-pit. Harry got the worst of it and I think everyone was either too shocked or wounded to realise for a moment what had happened. My first thoughts were for Harry. All the others had managed to crawl out of the pit. I find it so hard to write about, Mrs. Auckland, so please forgive me if I sound brutal or reopen your wound. Somehow, I reached Harry and managed to stop the bleeding, for he had lost his left leg below the knee and practically all the right foot. It almost tore my heart out to see him lying there, still conscious, with that swell smile on his face. I dressed his wounds and I called to a nearby ambulance to bring the doctor with morphia. As long as I live never will I forget the bravery of your son. He was one in a million – never turned a hair, although his pain and the knowledge that he'd lost his legs must have been breaking his heart. Not once did he stop

smiling, and as I dressed his wounds he looked up and said, ‘Think of all the money I’ll save on boots and shoes now!’ and ‘You’ve got to admit Jerry is a pretty good shot!’ His fortitude and unbroken spirit at such a time is quite beyond my comprehension. I did not think it possible for any person to be so seriously wounded and still smile as Harry did. When I lifted him into the ambulance the smile was still on his face, and as the ambulance drove off he looked back, waved, smiled, and said, ‘I’ll be all right, old son!’ to me ... Please forgive me if I have hurt you in writing this letter, but I could not rest until you knew how wonderfully brave Harry was and to tell you he will live on forever, enshrined in the hearts of we gunners who were privileged to know him and call him ‘Cobber’.[56]

The 2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment’s War Diary matter-of-factly logged how the gunners ‘have had to undergo mass dive bombing attacks, low-level machine-gun attacks and a fair amount of shelling but have stood up to it well and maintained the offensive spirit throughout.’[57]

* * *

Addressing his Beaudesert parishioners, Reverend Father Owen Steele (whom we last saw in Tobruk during the Easter battles) explained how the RAF had complete mastery of the air (with anecdotes of his time during the siege) while Egypt’s fate hung in the balance.

The battle in the air was a great battle of wits which often provided us on the ground with entertainment. The British would take greater risks than the Germans, and would always fight when outnumbered, while the Germans would not. Bodies washed up by the Mediterranean were mute testimony of air battles that we did not see or hear. Everybody that was washed up, whether our own or enemy, was given a Christian burial. One thing that stood out among our boys was their devotion to the dead.[58]

* * *

A break in the fighting gave Ian Fullerton a moment to pick up his above-mentioned letter.

Have been in heavy continuous action for the last 3 days. It has been a living hell of fire, and I am still surprised that our casualties have not been heavier. We have blasted the enemy continuously for 3 days and nights, and the strain has been terrific. All of us are at the point of exhaustion, as rest has been impossible. The boys have put up an inspiring exhibition and are making a splendid name for themselves. The gunners have been heroes, fighting their guns until they collapsed over them. It must be about a record for the number of shells put over by a battery in a single action. Last night we sent over well above 2,000 rounds. We have all taken our turn on the gun sigs, drivers, and everybody. We lost our group commander very early, wounded, and several more are wounded and suffering from shell and gun shock, but, considering the pasting we have taken, we have got off fairly lightly. Jerry has been throwing a lot of stuff back at us, and all of us have had some very close shaves. The regiment's first casualty was poor old Charlie Brown [Charles Patrick Browne], the CO's batman. He tried to beat a whizbang to a slit trench, but the shell won. He was a fine fellow and a good cobber. It's hard to see good men die like that. Still, it could be the turn of any of us next. You have to forget these things . . . Jerry is getting our range again – have to stop ... [59]

* * *

Tel el Eisa station. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Lieutenant Colonel Heathcote Hammer (2/48th Battalion) escorted a British United Press correspondent to a scene of the recent fighting. ‘We only lost the [Tel el Eisa] station for an hour’, Hammer explained.

Panzers between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. on 15 July simply crashed through and flattened out some of our men before we had time to lay mines and barbed wire. We sent in a counterattack from this point and the boys used ‘sticky’ bombs, which were most effective in smashing the tanks and terrifying the Italian infantry who cleared out. We recaptured the station and have held it since.[60]

Curious, Hammer had heard dance music wafting from a dugout on ‘the Tel el Eisa ridge while German shells burst overhead.’ Once it finished, he watched Chaplain Berkeley Archbold ‘emerge with a gramophone under his arm’, a portable diversion carried ‘wherever the thing does most good’. Whenever the Chaplain goes forward, Hammer claimed, ‘the Germans range on him. They think that he is bringing up bombs.’[61] Inside ‘his record box, “Arch” carries classics, hot stuff and hymns’, the *Glen Innes Examiner* elaborated.

The troops get whatever they ask for. On Sundays the padre carts his two boxes round the desert, holding short services in sand dunes, in wadis, or anywhere he finds Diggers. The padre's activities are doubled in battle. In the stickiest spots he is helping the wounded and comforting the dying. One night, when nobody else knew the way, he piloted an operational party through a minefield. He is fanatically anti-publicity and will be mad when he sees this in print. He is a dinkum Aussie.

(Perhaps to his chagrin, Berkeley Archbold's actions were honoured with the Military Cross. Heathcote Hammer sustained a head wound on 31 October when a German bullet passed through both cheeks without touching bone or teeth.)[62]

'Padre conducts a small service', Lance Corporal Jack Abbott (2/48th Battalion) noted on his photo of Chaplain Berkeley Archbold. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

The Reverend Berkeley Archbold and his trusted gramophone. Archbold's Military Cross citation acknowledged that he was 'always well forward with the men in the attack that captured Tel el Eisa, ready to minister to the needs of the wounded and dead. Day and night he would move around the Company localities under almost continuous shell fire and bombing, cheerfully maintaining the high spirits of the men.' (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

'We cut them to pieces'

Rommel was again thwarted by 'Rats'. The middle of July 1942 marked the first phase of Australian operations west of the El Alamein 'fortress', Divisional HQ noted.

In an attempt to find a soft spot and to wear down the defenders, the enemy made repeated thrusts, using considerable numbers at a time when he could ill afford them ... the price paid by the Germans and Italians was exacted very largely by the accuracy and intensity of artillery and machine gun support.[63]

More succinctly, a Broken Hill headline read: 'Rommel Squeezed By Aussies'.[64] A heavy price, however, was paid by the Australian infantry, as Alan Coe recounted in a description of the fighting on 22 July.

We had only two companies in this attack and it proved a bit light. We ran into a real hornet's nest. We were up against about three battalions of Huns, and we got whack-oh from machine-guns, artillery and his mortars, as well as ack-ack and antitank guns, which he didn't hesitate to use on infantry troops. We were forced to withdraw from this attack to our original positions. My company was sadly knocked about, and I am sorry to say some of my best mates didn't come out of it. Still, everyone did a marvellous job, and the boys we left behind fought and died like white men. I was lucky to come out of this stunt without scratch. There were quite a few moments when I wondered if I'd see my next birthday, just three days off, but I made it.[65]

Private Arthur 'Stan' Gurney (2/48th Battalion), a 32-year-old 'quiet chap' (and renowned cyclist) from the Western Australian goldfields had joined his battalion in Syria with AIF reinforcements. Itching to see action, he shared his regret of not having had 'a chance of locking horns with Jerry, but I hope we shan't be long now. I have had enough of sand and dirt in this desert and want something to happen.'[66] Crossing the start line at Tel el Eisa in the early hours of 22 July, Gurney lugged a cumbersome Boys anti-tank rifle. Facing withering fire, his platoon commander, Lieutenant Jim Wearing-Smith, directed: 'For Christ sake drop that bloody Boys, you'll do better with a rifle!'.[67] Seconds later Wearing-Smith was severely wounded, his platoon platoon sergeant dead. 'Grasping the seriousness of the situation and without hesitation', as Gurney's medal citation later read, he charged single-handedly across open ground to the nearest enemy post, bayoneting three men and silencing the position. Assailing a second post, he bayoneted two more enemy gunners, taking a third prisoner. Knocked off his feet by an exploding grenade, Gurney picked himself up and charged a third post, 'using the bayonet with great vigour'. Succumbing to injuries, his body was later found in the post, his hand still clutching his rifle. Gurney's bravery was recognised with a posthumous VC.[68] (Writing 'as a fellow West Australian', John Curtin telegrammed Gurney's father: 'this recognition of your son's heroic deeds gives me especial pleasure. In your pride and sorrow Mrs Curtin and I join with sympathy.' On a separate note, Sir James Mitchell, Lieutenant-Governor of Western Australia, asked 'if it is generally

known that a private, having received the VC, must be saluted by all soldiers, even by a field marshal'.)[69]

Private Stan Gurney's grave. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Padre G. Thomas (2/28th Battalion) beside his captured Kübelwagen, the German equivalent of the American Jeep. (AWW RCDIG1026653

Private Robert ‘Jumbo’ McGuire (whom we last saw at the beginning of the year writing of local customs) was also ‘knocked’ in the 22 July attack, having ‘just gone over the top at 3 a.m.’ He was invalided home with a shard of shrapnel still in his left leg.[70]

* * *

Lieutenant Nicol McLellan, whom we saw sniggering at Lord Haw Haw in Tobruk, found the fighting ‘a lot different’ at El Alamein.

We had Jerry out in the open and got a fair crack at him, and it was a decent crack we gave him. It’s the biggest shock he has had for a long time. Our lads are too good for him when they get anything like an even go. He tried out his tanks on us first and lost most of them. Then he tried infantry – we cut them to pieces. He is very careful now what he does on our front.[71]

* * *

In his final attempt to smash through Axis forces in the northern sector, Auchinleck launched Operation *Manhood* on 27 July. Aiming to seize Miteiriya Ridge, colloquially known as 'Ruin Ridge', the push ended in disaster with the loss of more than 1,000 men. Overrun, the 2/28th Battalion was surrounded by German tanks and virtually annihilated. Highly critical, Major Donald Jackson (24th Brigade) later condemned the ambitious plan for smacking 'a little of someone with a small map and large chinagraph pencil.'[72]

Stoicism again prevailed among the wounded. Working twelve-hour shifts, stretcher bearer Corporal Jos Trezise helped triage scores of wounded.

We take them from the ambulances and carry them to the various tents, either for dressings, operations, or sending them on to hospital. At normal times we are not very busy, but when there is fighting on, we have to work flat out. You see some pretty bad cases and it makes you realise what a terrible thing war actually is. The spirit of the wounded lads is really wonderful. The other day one lad was brought in with a bad hit in the leg and the doctors decided it would have to come off. One of the chaps working with me asked him if he would like his boot taken off. He answered with a smile that it did not matter, as in a few minutes leg and all would be off. We saw him again after the operation and had to carry him down for evacuation back to the base. He and his mate were lying side by side in a tent. His mate had lost an arm and was complaining a bit. He said to him, 'Don't worry, we will still be able to drink beer.' There is no doubt about them, they've got spirit all right.[73]

Wounded by shrapnel in Tobruk the previous year, 23-year-old Private Colin Murn, (2/43rd Battalion) a truck driver from Moonta (SA), 'was in an ammunition truck',

and when a piece of shrapnel whizzed through the cabin ... The crew got under the truck, but the barrages became so heavy that we all moved about 25 yards away and dug a shallow hole. I was no sooner in that bally hole than I was blown out.

Severely wounded, both Murn's legs were amputated. 'I was lucky; it could have been worse', he ideated. 'They'll fit a couple of dummies ... and I'll be

able to get about,' he said. (Murn later became a linotype operator at a Port Pirie newspaper.)[74]

* * *

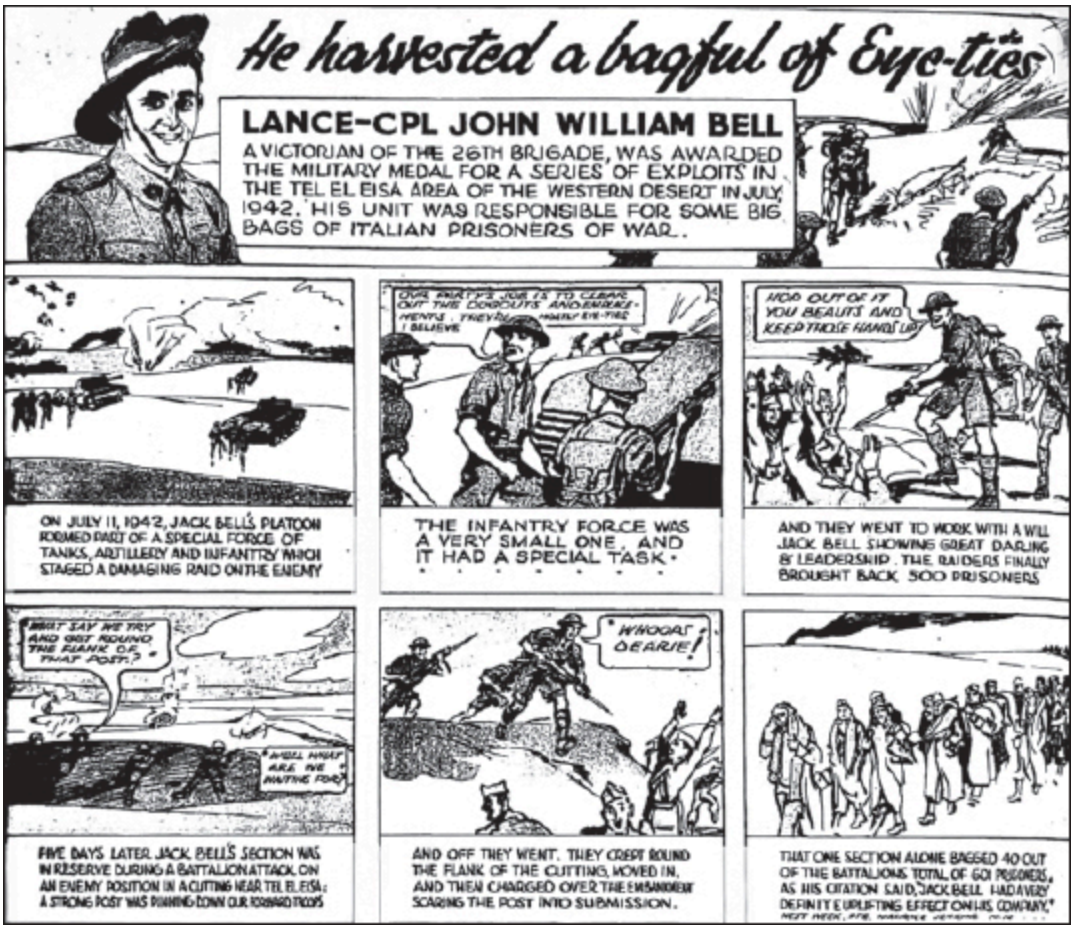
'I have just seen a lad and will shortly be operating on him', an Adelaide doctor wrote of a patient, 'injured by an old booby trap left behind – badly injured. I asked him if he was in pain. "A bit of an ache where my left hand was, but I guess I can take it." It makes one think.'[75]

The freshly dug grave of 33-year-old Private Victor Young, an Adelaide labourer killed in action at El Alamein on 22 July 1942. (State Library of South Australia PRG 1737/2/38)

* * *

The fighting had ground to a standstill by the end of July. After a string of wins culminating in the capture of Tobruk, Rommel was again forced into positional warfare. In the absence of a conclusive victory, German propaganda could only advise the beleaguered German populace, overjoyed by recent good news from Africa, that Rommel's advance was halted 'for

the time being'.[76] Ironically, amid a renewed crisis threatening Cairo, he again faced the 9th Division, a formation whose performance at Tobruk during the 1941 siege was unparalleled within the Eighth Army.


He harvested a bagful of Eye-ties
LANCE-CPL JOHN WILLIAM BELL
A VICTORIAN OF THE 26TH BRIGADE, WAS AWARDED THE MILITARY MEDAL FOR A SERIES OF EXPLOITS IN THE TEL EL EISA AREA OF THE WESTERN DESERT IN JULY, 1942. HIS UNIT WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR SOME BIG BAGS OF ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR..
ON JULY 11, 1942, JACK BELL'S PLATOON FORMED PART OF A SPECIAL FORCE OF TANKS, ARTILLERY AND INFANTRY WHICH STAGED A DAMAGING RAID ON THE ENEMY
THE INFANTRY FORCE WAS A VERY SMALL ONE, AND IT HAD A SPECIAL TASK.
AND THEY WENT TO WORK WITH A WILL JACK BELL SHOWING GREAT DARING & LEADERSHIP. THE RAIDERS FINALLY BROUGHT BACK 500 PRISONERS
FIVE DAYS LATER JACK BELL'S SECTION WAS IN RESERVE DURING A BATTALION ATTACK ON AN ENEMY POSITION IN A CUTTING NEAR TEL EL EISA. A STRONG POST WAS PINNING DOWN OUR FORWARD TROOPS
AND OFF THEY WENT. THEY CREPT ROUND THE FLANK OF THE CUTTING, MOVED IN, AND THEN CHARGED OVER THE EMBANKMENT SCARING THE POST INTO SUBMISSION.
THAT ONE SECTION ALONE BAGGED 40 OUT OF THE BATTALIONS TOTAL OF 601 PRISONERS, AS HIS CITATION SAID, JACK BELL HAD A VERY DEFINITE UPLIFTING EFFECT ON HIS COMPANY."

Newspaper cartoon depicting Lance Corporal John Bell's (2/23rd Battalion) bravery at Tel el Eisa in July 1942. Awarded the Military Medal, Bell's citation credited his 'courageous and enterprising leadership under all conditions', which had a 'very definite uplifting effect on the whole of his company.' ('He harvested a bagful of Eye-ties', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 7 July 1945, p. 28)

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

El Alamein – ‘No withdrawal’

Amid the uneasy lull in the fighting, correspondents fired off reports to readers hungry for information. Visiting the AIF front line, Canadian journalist Matthew Halton observed advanced Australian companies at Tel el Eisa scrutinising ‘enemy positions for signs of life and trying to memorise every detail on that memorable stage.’

I looked at the burnt-out German tanks, at a litter of clothes, and letters and odds and ends left behind by the Italians, at a tin hat with a hole through it, at exasperated men swatting flies, at dust clouds raised by enemy vehicles on the south-western horizon, at fighter aircraft humming over very high, at positions where men sat behind their machine-guns throughout the long, hot, dangerous day.[1]

A game of cricket on a sandy wicket. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

The ‘Alamein front in Egypt remains quiet’, *The West Australian* announced. By contrast, a storm was brewing within Whitehall.[2] Churchill was desperate for a victory. Having survived a no confidence motion after Tobruk’s sudden capitulation, he flew to Egypt on 3 August to investigate the situation first-hand and address what he believed were shortcomings in senior British leadership. Resplendent in white suit and sun umbrella, Churchill, in the guise of a ‘Mr Bullfinch’, toured the front lines, displaying his trademark ‘V for victory’ gesture. ‘It’s Winnie! It’s the old man himself ’, troops exclaimed. When he stopped to meet men of the 2/23rd Battalion, Private Stanley Collins walked forward to ask, ‘I don’t suppose you have a spare cigar, sir?’ Smiling, the prime minister obligingly took one from his jacket pocket. Much to the amusement of those around him, an anti-aircraft gunner out of earshot yelled, ‘When are you going to send us home, you fat old bastard?’[3]

Churchill retired to Cairo, where he drafted a memo calling for ‘drastic and immediate change’. His axe fell on Auchinleck as commander-in-chief Middle East and acting general officer commanding the Eighth Army. General Sir Harold Alexander would now oversee the Middle East as commander-in-chief, though in a tragic twist, the new Eighth Army commander, Lieutenant General William ‘Strafer’ Gott was killed when his aircraft was shot down by a German fighter. Gott’s replacement was a decorated First World War veteran whom troops would come to call ‘Monty’ – Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery. Comparable to Rommel’s arrival the previous year before, the influence of this new and energetic commander was immediate. Privately, he noted ‘that Rommel was preparing further attacks and the troops were looking over their shoulders for rear lines’ to pull back to. Henceforth, he ordered, there would be ‘no withdrawal’.[4]

Alan Moorehead was present as the new commander inspected the front lines, a ‘queer little bloke who stood up in his car and waved at every passing group of soldiers as though he had known them for a long time.’[5]

Montgomery took his binoculars up to the Hill of Jesus and looked across the desert front for the first time. He was new to this country; new even to this kind of warfare; and he looked around carefully. At his back lay the

yellow, ragged ridge of Alamein, swarming with bare-backed Australian troops.[6]

Eyeing a slouch hat, he inquired: 'I like that. Can you get me one?' An example was duly found. Thanking the donor, he added: 'I feel that I have as much right to wear it as you, as I spent some time in Tasmania' (in his youth, where his father was Bishop).[7] Gunners from the 2/7th Field Regiment, however, were indifferent – 'a Digger hat jammed down on top of his head in a way no self-respecting Digger would ever wear it, he must be a prize galah indeed.'[8] Various unit badges quickly adorned Monty's archetypal headpiece, though 'mixed' reactions arose over his adoption of an 'Australian bush hat'. In substitute, a British tanker offered Monty a black beret.

Morshead, though, was suitably impressed by his new commander, pulling Brigadier Victor Windeyer (20th Brigade) aside: 'This man really is a breath of fresh air. Things are going to be different soon.'[9]

'The fallen Aussie showed no mercy'

Thanks to the code breakers at Bletchley Park, Monty held the upper hand, wise to Rommel's proposed battle plan while the Allies maintained a stranglehold on over-extended Axis supply lines. With only 33 percent of Rommel's supplies reaching his troops, the busy Suez docks groaned under the weight of Allied matériel. Weighing up his predicament, Rommel opted to fight, launching what would be his last offensive in 1942 on 31 August. Writing home on the eve of battle, he weighed whether it 'might go some way towards deciding the whole course of the war. If it fails', he thought, 'at least I hope to give the enemy a pretty thorough beating.'[10]

Manoeuvring by moonlight in a sweeping hook to the south sector, he pushed the Allies back to the Alam el Halfa Ridge, only to face the carpet-bombing might of the Desert Air Force, dense minefields, a lack of fuel and a diversionary attack by the 9th Division. The 'Six-day Race', as German troops referred to it (referencing a famous bicycle race) was run by 6 September. The Axis assault force withdrew to its starting position, having lost 3,000 troops and fifty tanks. Nazi propaganda naturally downplayed the reverse as 'reconnaissance', but even Rommel later conceded: 'our last chance of gaining the Suez Canal had gone'.[11] He was 'no longer the same

daring leader', Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (Wehrmacht Commander-in-Chief South) wrote of Rommel, worn by 'continual, almost two-year long combat in hot climates coupled with endless friction with the Italians and the disappointment over the failure of his thrust towards Cairo had considerably damaged his health and, particularly, his nerves.'[12]

* * *

By now a veteran desert correspondent, John Hetherington surveyed the scene of Axis ruin, curls of blue smoke rising from burnt German vehicles appearing 'as splintered, charred skeletons; 'a young German soldier in grey' lay 'crumpled in death under a blanket his comrades had thrown over him.'[13] Grossly overtaxed, Rommel had no option but to prepare for the Allied offensive he knew would soon eventuate.

In a brush with death, Sergeant Arthur 'Stan' Gregson (9th Division Cavalry Regiment), a farmer from Kyabram (Vic.), survived an encounter with what Rommel nicknamed his 'Devil's Garden'.

Our troop leader's vehicle struck a mine – the second one in a fortnight. The first time they all got out of it with a shaking, but this time it was not so good. The driver was killed outright, and the troop leader got a blast in the face, which drove his teeth into his gums and split his lip. The other chap suffered severe shock. Then to top it off Jerry got on to us with mortars and anti-tank guns, but our artillery saved the day for us. They put up a smoke screen which enabled us to get out. I have had letters from the two injured men since they were evacuated, and they are doing well.[14]

Patrolling no man's land to inspect a different immobilised Carrier, Lieutenant George Barnes (2/28th Battalion) discovered, to his horror:

... a gaping hole in the right side of the driver's cabin, steering wheel was knocked off, right track was smashed, and the font bogey was blown off. Obviously, it was beyond salvage at this juncture. There were three bodies of Australian soldiers. One in the carrier, one on the ground each side of the carrier. The bodies were in a very advanced stage of decomposition and were beyond recognition. No identity disks could be found.[15]

* * *

‘The canteen comes around’, October 1942. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Mindful of the elaborate Axis defences that lay before him, Montgomery stood firm against his impatient overlord’s calls to strike. Instead, he turned to building up an enormous superiority in men and machines, intensifying training and instilling belief in victory. His planning was painstaking. With British meteorologists confirming a waxing moon and favourable weather conditions on 23 October 1942, he set a date for ‘pinning down and annihilating’ Rommel’s (renamed) *Deutsche-Italienische Panzerarmee*.

All was not well in the Axis camp. Rommel had flown to Europe for medical treatment. His ADC, Lieutenant Heinz Werner Schmidt, noticed his ailing appearance, writing: ‘he looked more finely drawn each time I saw him … he had now undergone twenty months of continuous mental and physical drain in the Desert … Rommel was a spent force.’[16] In an audience before Mussolini on 24 September, a ‘physically and morally shaken’ Rommel was cautioned that the Axis had ‘temporarily lost the battle in the Mediterranean’, that insufficient shipping was available for his army, and that US troops would shortly land in North Africa. Obstacles to one side, the Duce pressed the fatigued field marshal to conquer Egypt before American GIs arrived. A week later Hitler presented Rommel with his field marshal’s baton in Berlin. Mindful of an imminent Allied offensive, Rommel passed his African command to *General der Panzertruppe* Georg Stumme – a veteran tank commander unfamiliar with North Africa, in poor

health, and recently relieved of his command in Russia. Stumme nevertheless set to work with zeal, progressing Rommel's defensive works. 'There is no doubt the enemy is going to undertake a great offensive', he duly reported.[17]

* * *

In a 'very lucky escape', Gunner Harold Telford (2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment) was sitting with a 'great pal of mine', Stuart Mullighan, a station hand from Towitta (SA), on a truck,

when one of our planes [Kittyhawk] and one of Jerry's [Messerschmidt 109F] flew past very low, just a few feet from the ground. The result was that machine gun bullets flew everywhere, and my pal was hit in the head and died that night ... I was only two feet from 'Stewie' (my pal) when he was hit. Naturally I was No. 1 witness at the Court of Inquiry into his death, which was classed as 'accidentally killed in action whilst on duty'. The hard part was to help Padre Allan Dayton bury him alongside the other Diggers here – not a pleasant job when he is your best pal. However, next day orders came out for 'the big push'.[18]

(A later Court of Inquiry determined that Stuart Mullighan 'was killed by a bullet fired from the ground'.)

A light anti-aircraft gunner at El Alamein, September 1942. (AWW RCDIG1026653)

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Monty's 'big push'

The Western Desert stage was set for the clash that would ultimately drive the Axis from North Africa. 'All that is necessary', Montgomery deduced,

is that each and every officer and man should enter this battle with the determination to see it through, to fight and kill, and finally to win. If we do this, there can be only one result – together, we will hit the enemy for six out of Africa.[1]

The British offensive, the largest yet undertaken in the Western Desert, would play out in three acts: (a) the battle for position; (b) fending off counterattacks; and (c) the 'methodical destruction of the enemy.' Monty was optimistic. Given 'determination and the will to win, there was no reason why the offensive should not be an outstanding success', he reasoned.[2] Dubbed *Lightfoot* – an intriguing play on words given the mammoth task infantry faced in negotiating Rommel's extensive minefields, the operation was preceded by *Bertram*, an elaborate ruse to convince the Axis that the bulk of British forces were stationed to the south while shrouding the scale of offensive preparations. Infantry divisions, tanks, guns and thousands of vehicles were positioned 'right under his nose', near the coast. It was a story, an Australian officer recalled, of

romance of military cunning and ingenuity. I doubt if it has ever been surpassed – because there is literally not a vestige of cover in the desert – not a tree, not even a bush, but merely a little low scrub in patches, about a foot high.[3]

AIF infantry, with the support of British armour, would play a pivotal role in holding the vital northern coastal sector. Exercises, 'as nearly as possible

a replica of the actual attack', honed their readiness. Private George 'Porgie' Roberts (2/15th Battalion), an outback Queensland station hand, wrote of toeing 'the line to annihilate the enemy ... That suited one, for I have many scores to settle with him.'[4] Writing from what he considered a 'pretty good dug-out', a Sydney private was reassured by Montgomery's superior firepower; 'behind us there is a batch of guns that snap and snarl like foxies. Every time Jerry sends one over, he gets 20 back.'[5] Still, it would not be a pushover. The enemy, as the 2/48th Battalion War Diary specified, was 'holding strongly in well-prepared, mined and wired positions.' But 'his tank strength was much smaller than ours, although he is more experienced in tank warfare.' He was also 'short of petrol, oil and water.'

Two men from 2/48th Battalion unload start line tape in preparation for the forthcoming battle. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

A message from Montgomery was passed to all the men in the Eighth Army: 'Everyone must be imbued with the desire [to] kill Germans – everyone – even the padres, the latter one on weekdays and two on

Sundays.'[6] For all Monty's bravado, however, feelings of apprehension and nervousness grew. Sapper Claude Kennedy (2/3rd Pioneer Battalion), a clerk from West Wyalong (NSW), reassured drivers 'Vincent' Mulcahy and 'Les' Williams from Temora (NSW) – tasked with driving 'trucks loaded with mines right up on to Jerry's wire ... it only needed a stray shot and it was good night' – via tales of local sporting prowess.

I had a yarn to each of them when I heard they were to undertake the job and before we went in after I had reminded them that Temora had a record for turning out good sports athletes, they sort of gave me the impression that Temora was that night going to turn out a couple of gritty drivers and they [*sic*] did.[7]

'Hundreds of gun flashes'

For many Diggers, the opening night of the offensive would be their most vivid memory, as hundreds of guns simultaneously opened fire. Private Allan Evans (2/23rd Battalion) waited in a trench on the start line in silence. 'Nothing was said ... This was the show we had all been waiting for – our revenge.'[8] Corporal Alan Coe, whom we last saw after the July fighting, looked around noting the 'boys watching their watches ... and everyone's head looking not towards the enemy, but in the direction of our guns.'[9] Standing by his 25-pounder guns, Lance Sergeant Alan Benton (2/8th Field Regiment) waited nervously for the countdown to 9.40 p.m. – H-Hour.

The silence becomes unbearable. Pictures of what might happen in the next few minutes flash before your eyes – Stukas – shelling – tanks; 'Ten seconds to go' and the gunners are on their toes. The man who fires the gun has his hand on the firing lever – '5-4-3-2-1-FIRE!' Your voice – try as you may to keep it steady – is a trifle high-pitched, and then the very heavens themselves seem to shake as over the whole front the guns roar. The night is illuminated as the hundreds of gun flashes give the desert a ghostly appearance.[10]

The 'ground heaved and rocked as though in an earthquake', Captain Victor Beecraft (2/4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment) recalled. 'A kerosene tin on a box in my dugout fairly danced up and down with the vibration when the guns started, and finally jumped right off the box!' (Victor Beecraft later

disappeared on 4 September 1943 during a bombing raid east of Lae, New Guinea. His body was never found.)[11]

Writing of the 'grand sight', the desert sky ablaze with artillery fire, Gunner Donald Holmwood (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment) felt morale, 'never low at any time, just soared.' His troop sergeant pranced 'around like a two-year-old, yelling at the top of his voice: "Cop that, Jerry, and remember Warsaw, London, and Coventry."' To another observer, the 'sky was just one sheet of flame and the noise was terrific.'[12] 'You've no conception of the noise', a third soldier echoed, 'but was it effective! Scarcely an enemy gun remained to do any shooting for that night.'[13]

Carrying rifle and fixed bayonet, silhouetted against a kaleidoscope of flashes and explosions, the infantry 'went first and close up with them were the engineers', Major Hedley Rosevear (2/3rd Pioneer Battalion) explained to his sister. Their task was to make 'gaps through the minefields',

to allow the tanks and other transport to get through. To watch them at work in the moonlight, digging these mines up out of the ground, carting them away to one side, steadily, efficiently and calmly, making a path through minefields sometimes more than a thousand yards in depth fills one with a deep admiration and respect. The infantry were grand. They just pushed on slowly and relentlessly – their progress was more or less regulated by the artillery programme. Then they charged in with their blood-curdling yells when they got to the enemy trenches. Some would fall, hit by machine gun bullets, some would go skywards as a mortar or shell burst under them, some would tread on a booby trap, but the remainder would not even pause, let alone drop to the ground or seek cover.[14]

Against the backdrop of baleful shellfire, General Stumme was blind to what was happening at the front. With specially equipped RAF Wellington bombers jamming radio telephony and Axis telephone lines severed by the bombardment, he went forward to assess the situation firsthand. Ambushed by British infantry and anti-tank guns, Stumme is believed to have suffered a fatal heart attack. General Ritter von Thoma stepped in to fill the Axis command vacuum while Rommel, who was still not well, received word from Hitler the next morning that he was needed in Africa.

'Moving ahead into the unknown, through the shell and machine gun fire, minefields, booby traps and barb wire', Private George 'Porgie'

Roberts finally dug in a mile beyond the start line.

While we were digging a machine gun kept raking us with fire a few hundred yards distant, so we dropped our shovels and grabbed our guns (I was a two gun man that night; I had a Bren gun, also a rifle after the raid knew it would pay to be well armed) and set off in search of them; located them in a tank and rooted them out, one still showed fight so [I] dispatched him up to old St. Peter.[15]

Forging ahead through enemy territory, Canadian-born Corporal Ernest Palmer (2/7th Field Regiment) passed crosses marking German graves. Many lay 'where they had fallen.'

The sight was not very nice, but such is war. Then came small mobs of prisoners, Huns and Ities straggling back to our rear lines. Judging by their appearance they had had a rough time. We gave some of them bully beef and biscuits and were they hungry. A dog with a bone was not in it with them. After a smoke they continued on their way to a better time than they had experienced for many weeks. As we progressed thousands and thousands of prisoners came along. I was quite amused when I saw scores of Dago motor trucks loaded with Germans and Ities who were driving themselves back to our prisoner of war cages. They did not have any guards or escorts with them but were going in the right direction. If these prisoners had still had their rifles etc., they could have started a second front. However, they had been only too pleased to drop their arms.[16]

Sister Dulcie Thompson was working at the 2/3rd Australian Casualty Clearing Station when the first casualties arrived.

Arms blown off, legs blown off, lots of shocking leg wounds … stomach wounds and head wounds, every kind of casualty that you can imagine, sometimes two or three on one person. I have a very vivid picture of one Greek officer who had neither face nor hands as far as I could see.[17]

Engaged as a medical sergeant, Sergeant Victor Rae, (2/17th Battalion) shouted to be heard over 'an inferno of crashing and bellowing, roaring and shrieking' as he tended to the wounded.

We dressed their wounds as they stumbled back, giving morphia, and leaving them for ambulances to pick up later, and on, always on, on the heels of our soldiers through the enemy's minefields, through his wire, in

the heat of the battle, and into his forward defence lines ... Our worst day was a Sunday. 'Black Sunday' it is known as now! All day long they streamed through us. I lost my friend. He had an abdominal wound and went to aid somebody else who was hit, and a shell badly mauled his left arm. They flung him on a Bren [gun] carrier and roared up to us, only three or four hundred yards, and I got him out onto a stretcher, gave him a needle, secured the arm, but he had lost too much blood. He was a lovely Christian. A reformed drunkard. He only lasted two days. We worked on top of the ground, with no cover, and a tank battle raging on our left, and every miss roaring across us. Our officer was hit lying under our truck, while I was bandaging a bad shoulder of a captain who was hit a few feet away. In a night attack, we were pinned down on the ground while Jerry shelled for two hours. We couldn't get out, just had to lie on the ground in the dark and wait for it. After every shell-burst we would call to one another, 'You all right?' One screamed out of the night and went through the cabin roof of a truck five yards from me. I caught a piece [of shrapnel] in the leg. Shoved my hand down and burnt my fingers. It was red hot! When the barrage lifted, casualties from our success poured back, and for eight hours, working by moonlight, we were dressing, setting broken legs, giving anaesthetic and morphia, and it was bitterly cold. I forgot all about my leg. When only German walking wounded remained, I got the doctor to pull the shrapnel out of my leg with a pair of forceps. Two days later [on the night of 1–2 November], after a day and night's heavy shelling, in a lull a boy from the artillery ran over to me with a cut thumb, freshly done on a bully-beef tin. As I was dressing it, a shell roared down and killed him. He dropped, gushing blood, onto the sand at my feet, and I heard a thud as the doctor went down behind me. He was wounded in the right upper arm ... One night I went to where they said a German was lying in a dugout about 600 yards away. I found a young fellow all crumpled up. Had to tear the roof off the dugout and haul him up-wards, headfirst. Everything else in the trench was dead, and I suppose they thought he was, too. Cut his clothing away, straightened him out, dressed him, put his fractured leg in a Thomas splint, and got him to an ambulance. He spoke a little French. He gave me his [Nazi] 'God with us' belt buckle, a star of one of Russia's commissars, a wallet and money ... Made a tour of the posts for wounded. Found one Italian in a very poor way, and I was machine gunned and shelled all the way through the wire for my pains. He was a bad risk, and several times I

nearly left him. He'd probably die, and nearly cost me my life and some others who helped me. We got him in, anyway. Poor chap wasn't in a condition to be grateful.[18]

(Victor Rae later received the Military Medal for his duties near El Alamein, including those described in his letter; 'His splendid efforts in the interests of his fellow men have earned him their highest regard and admiration.')

The coastal sector fighting was, in Lieutenant Lonnie William's (2/43rd Battalion) opinion,

the stickiest spot we have ever been in, surrounded on three sides, shelled and machine-gunned incessantly, and having fifty [German] Mark 3 tanks milling around us didn't make the position easier. Herman knew the value of the position we held and for fifteen hours hurled everything except the kitchen sink at us.[19]

One of those in the fray, Private Percival 'Percy' Gratwick (2/48th Battalion), a single prospector from Katanning (WA), originally enlisted at 38 years of age, albeit in vain. Not to be deterred, Gratwick paid £20 to have his broken nose repaired, his second attempt to sign up (on 20 December) proving more successful. Moving ahead to the attack at Miteiriya Ridge on the night of 25–26 October, we find Gratwick's platoon pinned down by withering enemy fire and sustaining heavy casualties. Taking the initiative, Percy charged the nearest enemy post, killing a mortar crew with hand grenades. Armed only with a rifle and bayonet, he charged a second enemy post under heavy machine gun fire. Inflicting further casualties, Gratwick was within striking range of his objective when cut down by a burst of machine gun fire. Posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross (the battalion's third), the citation acknowledged 'his brave and determined action, which completely unnerved the enemy, and by his successful reduction of the enemy's strength, Private Gratwick's company was able to move forward and mop up its objective.' (From her Perth home, Gratwick's 'sad but valiant-hearted' mother threw her energies into the war effort, crafting camouflage nets. 'I want to go on making the nets,' she said. 'My son has done me a great honour. I always felt that he would, but I always expected him home', Perth's *Daily News* reported.)[20]

Wounded in the left shoulder on the same night (25–26 October), Corporal Kingsley Albrecht (2/48th Battalion), a labourer from Waikerie (SA), continued to lead his section in the bloody, confused fighting to silence an enemy strongpoint, only to discover it was a dug-in Panzer. Attacking with hand grenades, and killing the crew, Albrecht was wounded in the right shoulder and left leg close to his knee while shrapnel struck his groin and nicked his face under the eye. Downplaying his injuries – 'I got tangled up with a couple of bullets and four pieces of shrapnel. I must say my opponent was a very bad shot. I had a bullet through each shoulder' – Albrecht's courage and leadership was duly recognised with the Distinguished Conduct Medal. The medal citation acknowledged his 'gallant and speedy action'.

Although wounded by shrapnel in the head, and covered with blood, Albrecht continued to lead and to control his section during the reorganisation phase, and refused to be evacuated until his section had completed digging in and was ready for any enemy counterattack.

As Albrecht put it, 'old Jerry got a thrashing this time. He was just not in the race with our boys.'[21]

Upon his return to Africa, Rommel counter-attacked without delay. But as Schmidt revealed, 'he was smashed up by our old enemies, the medium bombers and the 25-pounders … He lost Panzers he could ill afford.'[22]

'Our bombers have never let up', a Digger commented, 'and our fighters are on the job all the time. It is thrilling to see our bombers coming over with the fighter escort around them. They are just like dogs guarding a flock of sheep.'[23] Elsewhere on the battlefield, Corporal Alan Coe's advance was stopped by a 'strong point divided with barbed wire, which we were unable to get through.'

There were plenty of Huns there in the gun pits and dugouts, and I think most of them are still in that vicinity to-day. Our attack came to a halt here where the strong point was divided with barbed wire, which we were unable to get through. Had we been able to charge straight on we no doubt would have captured the lot. On the other side of the wire, we could see them getting together, and I believe they would have all surrendered on the spot, but some of the boys opened up on them, and upset the show. They saw we were held up by the wire, and got back into their positions again, from

which they proceeded to give us a bit back. We got dug in in the part of the strongpoint we had taken and exchanged a number of shots. We could see big bands of Huns moving about, and thought they would counter-attack, but nothing came of it. It was later decided we should withdraw back part of the way and dig in. The few of the boys who had been hit were brought out with us. I didn't assist much in the digging in in the new place, for I had made only a couple of strokes with the shovel when I copped a bullet through the calf of the leg, straight in and out through the muscle. It didn't hurt at all, but it very quickly got stiff and of course I had to go out with it, and so I didn't see much of the fighting this time.[24]

* * *

Bad luck had struck Sergeant William Kibby (2/48th Battalion), an English-born plasterer, shortly after his arrival in the Middle East in December 1940. Breaking a leg on night manoeuvres, he was hospitalised for six months. Stricken by sandfly fever while temporarily in a training battalion, Kibby eventually re-joined his battalion in 1942. Courage came to the fore after his platoon commander was killed during the 23 October attack on Miteiriya Ridge; Kibby, brandishing a Thompson sub-machine gun, rushed the enemy position, killing three enemy troops and capturing 12 others. His company continued its advance.

A week elapsed. *Lightfoot* was taking longer than projected. A soldier from Queanbeyan (NSW) turned to his diary at Trig 29, one of the most contested sites, asking: 'seven days, how much longer can it last?'[25] Throughout the fighting, Kibby moved among his men, directing fire and offering encouragement to them despite heavy casualties. His platoon's role on the night of 30–31 October, Private Tom Martin (2/48th Battalion), a coach painter from Bowden (SA), recalled, was 'to cut west across Thompson's Post, take the railway, straddle the coast road, and then work back cleaning up enemy pockets and strongposts.' Confronted by crushing machine gun fire at point blank range on approach, Kibby, acting alone, went forward with grenades to silence the enemy position; he was struck and killed by a burst of machine gun fire. Back in St Morris (SA), his parents received a delayed – and unfortunate – cable the same day advising that their son was safe and well.

A posthumous VC recognised Kibby's 'outstanding courageous tenacity of purpose and devotion to duty', a soldier 'who fearlessly and unselfishly fought to the end to carry out his duty.'[26] Condolences poured in. Friends in Renmark (SA) described 36-year-old Kibby as a 'very friendly young man of a quiet nature', devoted to his family and scared only of snakes.[27] 'Everyone in the company had a good word for Kibby', according to Private Cliff Thompson (2/48th Battalion), an Adelaide abattoir worker.

He treated the boys in his platoon like a bunch of young brothers. He was always fighting to make things better for us, always fussing around, keeping things going, cheering us up and full of jokes. And when we were in action he never missed visiting the section posts, no matter how far apart or how much stuff was flying about.[28]

* * *

Tom 'Diver' Derrick was wounded in action on 31 October and evacuated. His wife, Beryl, Adelaide's *News* reported, said 'there were never any complaints in his letters, in which he usually referred to being in action as having a "bit of fun."' Since Derrick decided against telling Beryl of his injuries, it was not until she received an official notification that she knew of his condition. Derrick's diary entry on 30 November read: 'A look back at the last action and one must feel very lucky to be on the active list.' Awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions in July and 'devotion to duty in the period from May to October', a modest 'Diver' read of his exploits in the press, simply stating: 'I will be believing soon that I have done something.'[29] (Derrick later re-joined his unit and won the VC for gallantry at Satelberg in New Guinea on 24 November 1943. He died of wounds sustained in action at Tarakan on 22 May 1945.)

T.G. 41. COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA—POSTMASTER-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT No.

CASH REGISTER 7197

TELEGRAM

This message is presented for transmission subject to the Post and Telegraph Act and Regulations.

AFFIX STAMPS HERE

Words
Charge
Time
By
Remarks

The address must contain all information necessary to ensure delivery.

To MRS F M WINDLOW
92 BALLETT ST
CAMBERWELL

For Office Use Only
T
C
B

	IT	IS	WITH	DEEP
REGRET	THAT	I	HAVE	TO
INFORM	YOU	THAT	VX25757	WINDLOW
	IN			
HE WAS	KILLED	IN	ACTION	
	ON	31ST	OCTOBER	
AND	DESIRE	TO	CONVEY	TO
YOU	THE	PROFOUND	SYMPATHY	OF
THE	MINISTER	FOR	THE	ARMY
AIR	THE	MILITIA	BOARD	

ENTERED

FROM MINISTER FOR THE ARMY

The sender's signature and address should be written on the back of this Form if such particulars are not to be telegraphed.

D.4006/7 A)—C.5000.

Mrs Florence Windlow received this pro-forma telegram advising the death of her son, Les. Les' son Keith, recalls how his father was 'company marksmen despite having chopped off two fingers on his hand when mucking around in the backyard with my Dad and brother Keith.' (Courtesy of Ray Windlow)

Poignant postcard received from Palestine. Both men pictured later died at El Alamein. Sydney Batty (left), a First World War veteran, was killed in action on 22 July 1942. Les Windlow died three

months later on 31 October 1942. (Courtesy of Ray Windlow)

* * *

'There can be few luckier men who have gone through the war than one private from Moonta who was in the party', vouched Adelaide's *News*. Private Jack Abraham, a 25-year-old labourer who enlisted in July 1940, was wounded in Tobruk on 23 August 1941 by a German S- (*Schrapnellmine*) or 'jumping jack' mine, an antipersonnel landmine propelled to waist height before detonating – a lethal shrapnel screen radiating outwards. Struck in the back and leg, Abraham was evacuated from Tobruk, spending four months in hospital.

Assigned to 2/48th Battalion, Abraham was one of a party moving on an enemy machine gun nest on the night of 31 October 1942 when a German gunner opened fire, bullets ripping through his abdomen, left leg and arm. Rescued by stretcher bearers, he was placed on the ground after inadvertently being carried into a German position. His woes continued.

... a truck dashing through the darkness ran over him, one wheel hitting the handle of the stretcher and tipping him off. Next, one of our Bren gun carriers loomed up in the darkness. It headed straight for him. He shouted, but the carrier came on. Then he gave up hope. The bullet wounds meant nothing. This was the end he thought. But the crew of the carrier had heard him, saw him as they were almost on top of him. The carrier shuddered to a halt, reversed. One track had touched his head, almost ripped his ear off.[30]

Classified as 'unfit for service for a period greater than six months', Abraham spent most of 1943 in various Australian military hospitals before his discharge on 9 December. Having satisfied 'three months satisfactory service', he found himself eligible to receive 'one civilian suit and hat.' (Never one to dwell on his misfortune, it was subsequently reported in the press in 1947 that 'Cheery Jack's' experience of war 'might have deep psychological reactions ... but Jack has never lost his cheerfulness.' Employed in a shipyard, wearing a special abdominal belt supplied by the Repatriation Department, Abraham also enjoyed 'a quiet game of cricket at Whyalla on Sunday afternoons.')[31]

* * *

‘Things have been pretty hectic here for a while’, Private Dudley McCaffrey (2/11th Field Ambulance), a Taree (NSW) farm hand outlined, and ‘I’ve had a ringside seat right through’. During the savage fighting in the area known as ‘the Saucer’, a former railway worker’s building – known to the Australians as the ‘Blockhouse’, or to the Germans as the ‘Hut’ – operated as an improvised medical theatre, staffed by surgeons from both sides. McCaffrey was charged with crossing the railway line and bringing the wounded in.

The Jerries were on both sides of us and they were firing straight along the line. When we got right up to the forward positions, we came across three Jerry doctors and quite a few orderlies and from then on we worked in the same room as they were working in. In the morning we were still going flat out carrying in wounded and it was then that I met one of the bravest men I have ever seen. He was a man who must be nearly 50. He copped a hit in the leg in the first few minutes of the show but he kept on carrying in wounded all that night and next day. Just at dawn we had to go ‘over the railway line and carry some chaps through a minefield. I don’t mind saying that I was a bit jumpy on the first trip across, as the machine gun bullets were pretty thick. I was glad I had the old chap with me. When things were at their toughest, he said: ‘Keep, going, son; you are doing good work and the Almighty will look after you.’ So somehow it helped a lot. Another experience I’ll never forget was on the next day when two Jerry bearers and one of our chaps and I and an MO went out into No Man’s Land to see if we could find any wounded. We found four Jerries but only one of our chaps. It seemed very strange at first to be working side by side with them while all around us on both sides were doing their best, to kill one another. One of the German doctors has the Iron Cross and also some other medal [*Deutsches Schutzwall-Ehrenzeichen* or ‘West Wall Medal’] for service in that line where we were going to hang out our washing at one time. They pronounce it differently to us and at first couldn’t catch on, but when I did I remembered about hanging our washing on it [the Siegfried Line] and one of the other Jerry doctors, who speaks fairly good English, saw the joke. They did a great job and no one who saw them do it could help but admire them. I can’t say whether all Jerries are like these, but from what I’ve seen in the last few days they have fought hard and clean. I think that, as far as possible they tried to avoid shooting stretcher bearers, but of course, when

you have to go in front of a place that they are having a go at you can hardly expect them to stop firing.[32]

* * *

'Of course, it is too early to be optimistic about the outcome of the battle here, but personally I think it is the turning point of the war', an upbeat sapper supposed at the end of October 1942.

You would have laughed if you had seen me the other night. I got some German and Italian prisoners and did not know what to do with them, as I had to get on with my own particular job. I passed them over to the infantry. There was one captain captured and he said he had been fighting the English for three years but had been here only nine days so it did not take long for us to wheel him.[33]

'When is this madness going to end?' London-born emigre Private Eric Lambert (2/15th Battalion) wondered fatalistically; 'I can't help wondering if my turn is coming.'[34]

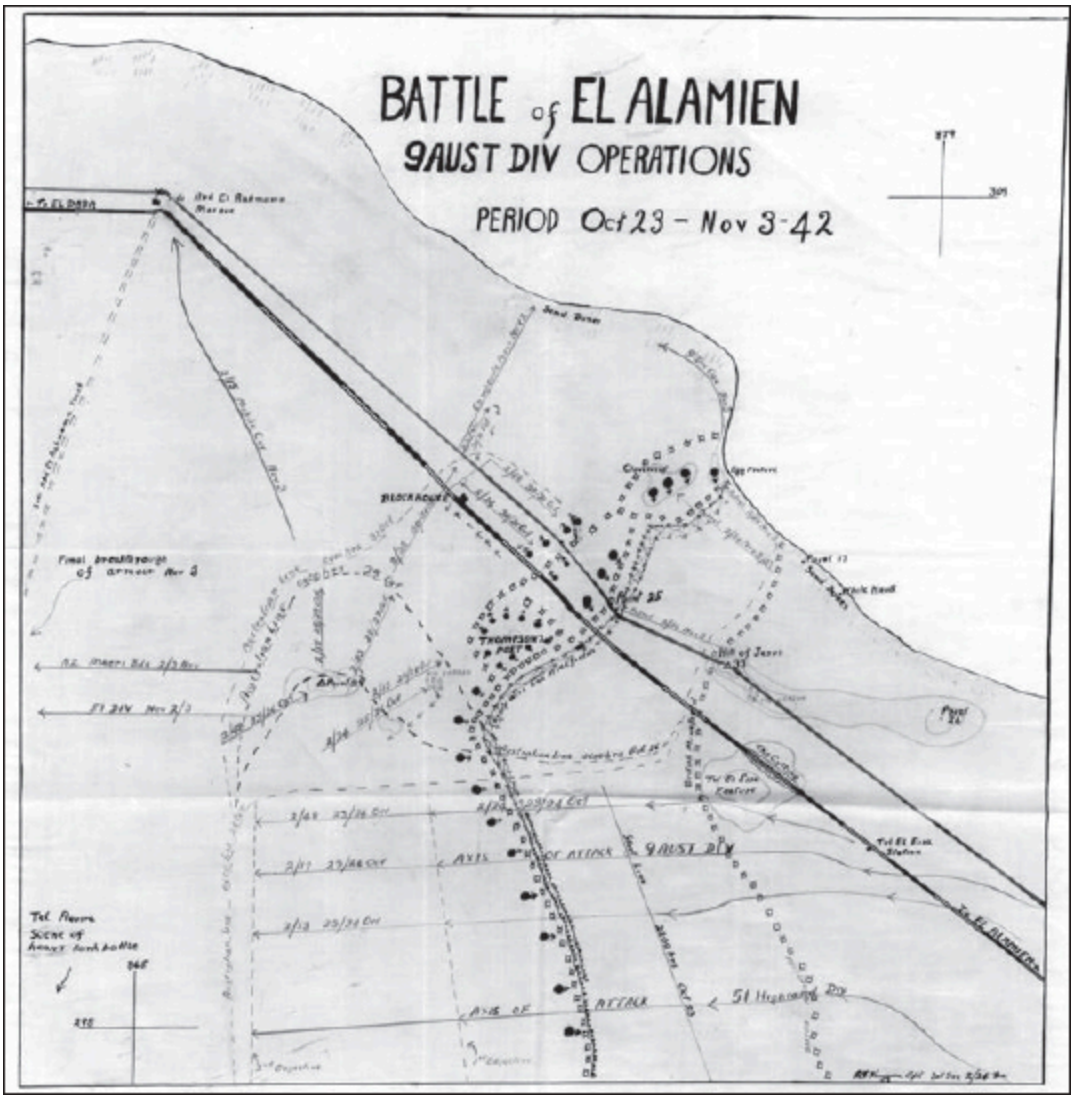
Alarmed that Rommel might attempt to recapture Trig 29, Morshead directed the relief of the battle-weary 2/24th and 2/48th Battalions on the night of 31 October by the 2/28th and 2/43rd Battalions, a decision lauded by some as a masterstroke. The 2/24th Battalion was especially hard hit: by the end of the war it had the highest casualty rate of any AIF battalion, with only 59 troops leaving the front line that morning. Warrant Officer Jimmy Nicoll recalled how the transport officer in charge, 'was rather perturbed at the prospect of being caught in the area with all his [20] trucks at day.' Asking when the 'rest of your mob' would arrive, as those present climbed aboard the first four trucks, he was shocked to learn there were no more – 159 officers and men were killed in action or died from their wounds; another 439 were wounded.[35]

One of those killed just hours before he was due to be relieved was Private Leslie 'Les' Windlow (2/24th Battalion), a 21-year-old carpenter who inflated his age when enlisting at the Melbourne Town Hall. Turning to a fresh sheet of Church of England letterhead, Chaplain Frederick Porter (2/23rd Battalion) later wrote to Windlow's mother, conveying his 'deep and abiding sympathy in the great loss you have sustained through the death

in action of your dear son.' Although from another battalion, Porter felt 'that he and I were well known to each other because of what his mates have told me of matchless courage and devotion to duty which displayed in that last war action which cost him his life.'[36]

Corporal Robert 'Snow' Ranford (2/48th Battalion), a SA station hand, pictured in purloined German uniform. Awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for 'leadership and great determination in destroying enemy posts' on the night of 30/31 October, Ranford was later KIA in New Guinea on 20 November 1943. (State Library of South Australia PRG 1737/2/44)

Driving his tanks and men forward on 1 November to punch through 'the Saucer' and reach the coast, Rommel underestimated his opposition. His atypical, imperfectly coordinated attack failed in closely contested fighting. 'Had they concentrated it might have been a different story', Morshead later recapped, 'they all came against us at one time or another, but not as in great strength as they should, and so were beaten in detail.' At odds with Morshead's version of events, a Tobruk veteran ranked it as the 'most concentrated attack I have ever been in'. Regardless, the 24th Brigade's stand was a crucial factor in repulsing the desperate German charge.[37]



Australian 9th Division operations at El Alamein 23 October – 3 November 1942. (AWM RCDIG1022012)

‘Battered beyond all human resistance’

Montgomery adjourned to his caravan on 30 October to finalise Operation *Supercharge*, a plan to force a path through the dogged Axis line. With the 9th Division holding down the main German formations in the north, the dwindling enemy armour stymied through lack of fuel, British armour would strike a decisive blow in the south. The attack was launched at 1.05 a.m. on 2 November.

Attached as a stretcher bearer to a rifle company near Tel el Eisa, Private John Carey (2/28th Battalion), a Warwick (Qld) labourer, made 11 trips to a RAP carrying wounded, each sortie covering 700 yards under

murderous fire. Attending every cry for help, no matter how exposed or how heavy the fire was, Carey worked unstintingly without food until the enemy was finally subdued. Private Robert Fullwood (2/28th Battalion) likewise stood ‘coolly firm’ in an open position with his radio/transceiver set, operating it ‘under the most adverse conditions’ to maintain battalion communications.[38]

Corporal Edward Dugmore, a married labourer from South Perth, displays his dented helmet from a German air-burst 88-mm shell during an attack on the 2/28th Battalion near the Blockhouse on 1–2 November 1942. Dugmore was later killed in action on 20 October 1943 in New Guinea. (AWM 029937)

‘Meals, washing up, when you have time’, Lance Sergeant Alan Benton wrote 12 days into the battle.

The most important things – hot drinks – come at regular intervals and help you keep awake. Cigarettes – a chain of them – steady your nerves. You sleep fully dressed, ready to jump up and go on with your job at a moment’s notice. Messages of congratulation pour in as it becomes evident that the enemy is being battered beyond all human resistance. And then prepare to advance! As we follow the enemy up we see some of the destruction we have caused; see on the ground, written in blood and destruction, the effect

of our work ... Dear family, I have not become a bloodthirsty soldier, but you must try and realise our point of view. To smash a tank is an achievement you think, not of the human lives that have been cut off in their prime as the shell smashed the tank, but of yourself doing your job, and to hit a tank is an achievement.[39]

Sergeant Don Perkins, whom we remember longing to 'avenge Tobruk', earned his third stripe in battle.

I can't describe much about the fighting, except that for a fortnight it was hard and bloody. There were almost continuous attacks and counterattacks, but when our armour got through it was all up for Jerry. The part of the line where we were engaged was entirely manned by Jerries. My two mortars destroyed a large enemy mortar and crew of five, and also scored three direct hits on an enemy observation post, killing five. We watched them carry out the bodies, under a white flag. Their casualties were staggering.[40]

'The day [4 November] probably will be famous', Captain Ian Macintosh (2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion), Blacktown (NSW) Shire Engineer, remarked,

not because it was my birthday, but because a man could stand up on the hill of Jesus and see no Fritzes – except stiffs! It was the end of the battle, and boy, did he get a hiding. Probably the papers had some reference to it; but as far as I can see, people in Australia are more interested in the acceptances for the [Melbourne] Cup than winning the war, in which so many of my friends were killed.[41]

Finding himself in 'the road of a Jerry shell', on 5 November, Trooper Vernon Huppatz (2/9th Cavalry Regiment), a farm labourer from Saddleworth (SA) thanked his luck – 'copped some shrapnel across the back – not very serious thank heavens – and I am feeling nearly as good as ever'. Typical of many Diggers, Huppatz's Carrier wireless operator,

had quite a mania for souvenirs and had collected three types of German guns as well as 'Itie' stuff, I threatened to throw the lot off as we were getting overloaded, when Jerry landed a shell near us and settled the argument so far as I was concerned.[42]

* * *

Hospitalised in late September 1942 with hepatitis, Gunner James 'Jim' Jackson (2/7th Field Regiment), a Broken Hill jackaroo, was fortunate, too; 'during a rest, while my crew and the one near it were having a smoke, a bomb was dropped, and because of other guns firing the chaps never heard it. I lost a couple of mates.' Returning to his regiment on 27 October, Jackson was eyewitness to Rommel's headlong retreat.

I've seen an army on the run and an army in full pursuit, and it's a sight I'll never forget – the thousands and thousands of motor vehicles slowly wending their way westward – just like cars coming back from Oakbank! This went on for a couple of days and never a sign of enemy aircraft. The length of these lines was unbelievable, and it would be hopeless to try and guess their numbers. Jerry left a terrific lot of equipment of all kinds behind, and the lads had a wonderful time 'scrounging'. They were like kids trying on 'Itie' and Jerry equipment, clothes, etc., and firing off their guns. We came upon a dump of lollies and cigarettes – some of his Xmas fare! I guess – and these all went 'down the hatch' very smartly, I can tell you. All the lads had grins from ear to ear, and what with the good news from New Guinea, morale was very high. It was marvellous to go careering along the old Mersa road at a fair bat knowing that we had Jerry on the run after months of battling. A sight which never failed to make us smile were the Jerries and Ities strolling leisurely along the side of the road, waiting to be taken prisoners by anyone who had the time to spare ... We are at present resting, but I've been able to have a look round the countryside. Gear is littered everywhere. I've got hold of a tin hat with the eagle and swastika on it, and also some … Jerry riding breeches which might come in handy someday.[43]

Writing of the prisoners streaming back towards the Allied lines, Sergeant Donald McPherson (2/7th Field Company), a carpenter from Esk (Qld), noted how the younger Germans at El Alamein were still 'cocky', but the older men – emaciated, unshaven and filthy, their uniforms in tatters – less confident.[44] 'The Italian', if anything, 'is still the same Happy as Larry because the war has finished for them'. Driver William Dixon, last seen ducking from German dive bombers, watched a truckload of POWs pull up. They 'sang us a song', he recounted.

They are beautiful singers, too. I suppose you read in the papers about the Ities driving their own vehicles in loaded with prisoners and then driving back for more. Well, that is a fact, as I saw them myself. Of course, there was a guard with them when they were going back, but I don't think he was really necessary. The Germans ran away and left the poor old Iti to stand the brunt of the attack. But the Air Force soon caught up with Jerry, and they squared up for Greece and Crete in big doses.[45]

Axis prisoners were separated by nationality and held in separate POW enclosures, otherwise, Captain William Haworth (2/23rd Battalion) believed,

they very soon come to blows. Some time ago I had the task of entraining 800 POWs, over half of whom were Italians. Until we separated them, we could not make any progress. We only had a guard of 25 men, half of which were occupied in stopping fights. Even the German officers protested against having to travel with their own Axis members. The contempt that these people have for each other is amazing.[46]

South Australian Sappers (2/3rd Field Company) Edward McCabe and Keith Hartley accompanied correspondent John Hetherington to an area near the Australian front line with the invitation to inspect a captured 88-mm gun, though with caution.

We walk up to the gun and climb into the sand-bagged pit from which it had been earlier firing on the Australians. 'Careful here', McCabe advises me. 'The Jerries have left a lot of booby traps behind. Twelve of our chaps were killed or wounded near the railway line a couple of hours ago by a booby trap.'[47]

The scourge of Allied tanks – a dug-in German 88-mm gun abandoned near the coast road, west of El Alamein. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Threatened with encirclement, Rommel had, in defiance of Hitler's 'Victory or Death' order, directed a general retreat day. His forces were in full flight by the time formal permission arrived. 'The long attrition of Alamein suddenly ceased to be a battle', General Sir Harold Alexander expounded: 'the problem was now one of pursuit.'[48]

After the battle. A Digger beside a captured German Sd. Kfz. 251 half-track armoured personnel carrier. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

Taken prisoner by the Germans at Tel el Eisa, Private Ronald Gerlach (2/48th Battalion), an Angaston (SA) packer, was liberated by advancing British forces. Wounded on the forehead during the July fighting, Gerlach had stepped on a land mine on 31 October, losing most of his right leg. Unable to move, roughly 300 yards from the German lines, he took stock.

[With] plenty of rations and half a bottle of water ... I made a splint of sorts out of my bayonet scabbard. The leg was so badly smashed that after a while I did not feel anything much. But after two days and nights of blistering heat and biting cold I had had about enough. So I sang out to Jerry to come and get me.

They did. His leg crudely dressed, Gerlach was ferried west along the cratered coastal road, endlessly strafed by British fighters. 'Did those boys make a mess!', he happily recollected, though at the time he was in no state to grasp the RAF's handiwork. A field amputation of his shattered limb preceded a journey to a 'pretty rough and tumble hospital' at Mersa Matruh. A day or two later, 'our chaps came along!' A month later Gerlach embarked for Australia on a hospital trip, ultimately discharged as 'medically unfit' on 18 September 1943.[49]

A road ‘In which I travelled many miles’, Lance Corporal Jack Abbott remembered. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

‘Made possible by the Homeric fight over your divisional sector’

Victory at El Alamein, ‘a very hard, long and bloody fight’ in Morshead’s words, commanded a hefty price. An official report noted the 9th Australian Division’s ‘magnificent effort. They fought themselves to a standstill, till flesh and blood could stand no more. Then they went on fighting.’ Despite making up approximately 10 percent of the British Eighth Army’s strength, Australian troops comprised 22 percent of the 13,560 casualties. More broadly, in the period from July to November 1942, the division sustained close to 5,500 casualties. Axis losses in the final battle, based on Ultra intercepts, amounted to 6,939 men killed or wounded, plus 23,602 taken prisoner.[50]

In recognition of the 9th Division’s role in the fighting, Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie (commander of the British 30th Army Corps) wrote to Morshead, asking him to explain ‘the immediate part’ they had played.

It is perhaps difficult for them to realise the magnitude of their achievements as the main break-through of our armour was accomplished on another part of our front. This could not be seen by them, but I am quite certain the break-through was only made possible by the Homeric fight over your divisional sector ... The main mass of heavy and medium artillery was concentrated on your division's front. The enemy had concentrated the whole of their Panzer corps against you. Your fight gave the opportunity for the conception of the final breakthrough in the centre, but this could never have been done if your front had been broken.[51]

Vaudeville concert near the front line. 'That's a real woman on the stage', Lance Corporal Jack Abbott noted. (Courtesy of Naomi Abbott)

The situation in North Africa, Brisbane's *Courier Mail* foresaw, sat well for the Allies. 'If the Axis can be finally shattered in North Africa, immense possibilities are opened up for the Allies, not only militarily, but also politically.' Control over the Mediterranean would be restored, Hitler would be forced to transfer forces from the East and 'should Italy make a separate peace, Germany would not allow it.'[52] Events moved fast. Captain William Haworth was attending a unit concert on 8 November when news of Operation *Torch* broke.

... all the artists were from our own men. The first half was very poor, and the reception from the audience was worse. The second half would have been the same except that during the interval news came through that 100,000 Americans [80,000 US and 25,000 British troops in two armoured and five infantry divisions] had landed in Morocco [and Algeria]. The effect was electrical. We cheered lustily. Needless to say, the second half of the programme was a huge success. Everybody went home feeling happy, and I am sure had similar dreams to mine – that of returning home.[53]

'But I don't think you want to hear about such things'

Exhausted after weeks of combat, a period of rest in Palestine, including five days leave, afforded the Diggers time to visit sick or wounded comrades, travel and play sport. A football match on 13 December saw the 2/24th Battalion defeat the 2/48th Battalion: 11 goals, 21 behinds to 2 goals, 4 behinds.[54] Reflecting on the battle, Diggers wrote to family and relatives, the elation of victory tinged by the heavy losses within their ranks. 'I don't usually go in for this sort of thing', an officer touted, 'but this is what we have planned and worked for, for so long – jubilation is hardly the word to describe our feelings at having outwitted the enemy and routed him utterly.'[55] Elated, Warrant Officer Jack Luff (2/2nd Machine Gun Battalion) of Gundagai (NSW), would toast fallen comrades.

No doubt we had a hectic ten or twelve days. Now that it is over, I wouldn't have missed it for worlds ... Anyhow, I am getting all the company sergeants together tonight and by the time we have finished up we will just about have won this war, I think. It is one thing really worthwhile after a stoush, a bit of a reunion. Three of them will not be there, but we will have a jug of beer for them and tell a hell of a lot of lies for their benefit.[56]

'I came safely through the big battle, and I think the Hun has had the biggest licking he has ever had', Corporal Thomas Fitzpatrick (2/17th Battalion) wrote in reflection, sanguine that an Allied victory would prevail.

I don't expect he is finished altogether and there will probably be another fight somewhere up in Libya, but I doubt if he will ever be able to muster enough armour to match ours. The battle was a really remarkable experience, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Of course, it is sad

to think that so many good cobbers did not come through, but that was only to be expected. We did not expect a walkover and certainly did not get it. The Germans fight like tigers, but our chaps were too determined and, had too many guns and planes for them. No troops in the world could have stood up to the shelling we put over, while all day our big bombers would be over his lines dropping tremendous loads of bombs on his forward troops. No wonder they cracked after ten days of it. They did well to last so long. As I heard one German officer whom we were bringing in as a prisoner say, 'I've fought in Poland, France and Russia, but there has never been anything like this before. My nerves are all shot to pieces.' ... I had some nasty moments as well but one has to expect those. My gunner, a lad of 18, was killed. We had jumped out of the carrier to drag a wounded man to a safer place and were just lifting him when we got a burst of machine-gun fire. The gunner was shot through the heart while two other bullets went between my legs and hit the wounded man. My only injury for the whole show was a pretty badly cut hand. I think I got that diving into a trench as a shell burst close by. On the first night I got a small piece of shrapnel in the arm. It is still there, but not worrying me in the least. I told the doctor about it some days later and he said to let it go as long as possible as it wasn't sore. It will probably work out. Since the show finished a couple of days ago we have been having a good time going through the old German positions, picking up what we can find. My bag so far includes two automatics, a pair of binoculars, the fountain pen with which I am writing this (the paper and ink are also German) and a few other souvenirs. Among the latter is a huge old-fashioned pipe, beautifully hand carved. I will send it home as soon as possible. It should be worth pounds.[57]

'Dear Mum', Gunner Victor Cole (2/3rd Anti-Tank Regiment), a Boorowa (NSW) station hand penned from Palestine, a place 'where it is nice and quiet.'

I was in the 'push' which put Jerry on the run, and what a sight it was! Our boys did a great job and are earning the rest they are getting now. I have been in Palestine about three weeks now, and it is great to be out of the dust and flies. The flies were very bad while the big 'do' was on – so many dead about, I helped to bury a lot at the finish. It is a sight that one cannot explain – hundreds of trucks, guns, planes, etc., lying about, burning, and worst of

all, men! I could say a lot about the fighting, but I don't think you want to hear about such things.[58]

'No doubt a letter from me will cause you as big a surprise as would a rebate in your income tax', Signaller Terry Hourigan (2/13th Battalion), a Michelago (NSW) postal worker, opened in a letter home.

I managed to get a look-in on the Alamein show, though I did not beg for it. It was some battle. It makes a man proud to say he was with the Aussies in that. The AIF have a great reputation as fighters, but we'll take off our hats at any time to the greatest of them all, the Kiwis, and especially the Maoris. They proved great mates, too ...

Writing in tribute to his friend, 38-year-old Francis 'Barney' Roberts (2/17th Battalion) from Braidwood (NSW), who was killed at Tobruk the year before, Hourigan vowed to remember him.

Poor old Barney paid the penalty, for being a great soldier. He was just as popular in uniform as he was in cricket or football togs, and he left behind a host of Diggers who will testify to his sterling qualities. I was in the same battalion as 'Barney' for some time before joining the 13th. 'Barney' will be sadly missed in future cricket matches on the Rec. at Braidwood. I have one ambition – to be swinging the willow again for Turalla in more matches against Braidwood for the 'Barney Roberts Memorial Cup.'[59]

To grieving parents, Lieutenant John Bray (2/17th Battalion) worked his way through a list of condolence letters. Writing to the father of Lance Corporal Clem Crane (2/17th Battalion), who died of wounds on 25 October 1942, he began:

Dear Mr. Crane,

I feel that there is very little one can say, in the way of condolence to you and your family. However, as the officer commanding the platoon in which your son was serving at the time of his death, I am writing this short note to assure you of the very deep sympathy which the rest of the men and myself feel for you in your loss. Although I only took command of this platoon two days prior to the first attack, I had the opportunity of getting to know your son very well when he was under me for special training as a NCO, while in Palestine in January 1942. During the whole time I had any dealings with him he always impressed me as being a particularly fine type of man, who

always strove to do any job assigned to him, to the very best of his ability, it is because of such lads that the AIF has earned the name it bears today. As soldiers we all know when we enter a battle, that some of us will not live to see the results of what we have fought for, but it is the Almighty who chooses the men who are to lay down their lives. Your son was right beside me when he received the wound from shell fire which caused his death. It was at least five minutes before we could evacuate him for medical attention owing to the extremely heavy shell fire. However, he kept his chin up and remained calm and when the time came, helped us very considerably himself. I never saw him again but from enquiries I have made he died later in a Field Ambulance and is buried with most of our other lads who gave their lives, at a near-by cemetery very close to the railway line at El Alamein Station ...

Yours very sincerely,
John W. BRAY. (Lieut.)[60]

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘Yesterday was the proudest day of my life’

The battles for El Alamein were a decisive turning point in the war against the Axis in North Africa, much the same as the 6th Division’s defeat of the Italians the year before. Hard fighting continued, culminating in Rommel’s withdrawal into Tunisia and the eventual Axis surrender on 13 May 1943. But the ‘magnificent 9th’, as Monty called it, was needed in the Pacific to join its sister divisions in the fight against Japan. John Curtin, at General Blamey and US General Douglas MacArthur’s behest, received word on 15 December 1942 of the division’s transfer home the following month. Leaving the Middle East, four troopships sailed on 24 January 1943, bulwarked by escorting warships. Closing an uneventful voyage, the convoy dropped anchor at Fremantle on 18 February, the Diggers overjoyed by the prospect of three weeks’ leave.

Diggers on deck as the 9th Division arrives home from the Middle East. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

'Despite the hammering they took', Perth's *Daily News* noted, 'they did not appear the least jaded.'

Uppermost thoughts in their mind were of a happy-reunion with mothers, wives, sisters or sweet-hearts. The men were unusually reticent, disinclined to brag about their deeds, preferring to regard the achievements of the division as being attributable to teamwork.[1]

'It would be hard to assess a man's feeling as the transport slipped in through the 'Heads', a Sydney soldier mused.

It seemed as if we were seeing them for the first time. We had never bothered noticing them when we were civilians ... They were not just masses of rock that reared out of the water; they were friendly arms that gathered us in protectively as if to assure us that we were now safe.[2]

Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead presents certificates to soldiers returned from the Middle East acknowledging their gallantry during the fighting around El Alamein. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Disembarking at Sydney on 23 March, Private Bob Richardson (2/3rd Field Company), purportedly helped smuggle, 'Percy', a white goat mascot acquired in Syria for two tins of bully-beef, ashore.[3] Curtin announced the division's arrival in the House of Representatives the same day.

The presence in Australia of this splendid fighting division, at a time when our homeland is threatened by Japan, will be a source of deep satisfaction ... a valuable stimulant for all the people of Australia in the operations that are ahead.[4]

A cable from Churchill was also read out, with Britain's wartime leader 'very glad to learn that your fine division arrived home safely.'

Wounded soldiers from the Middle East arrive home on a hospital ship. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

Across the country, cheering crowds lined city streets to welcome the Diggers home. 'No men ever had a greater welcome than these', Mackay's *Daily Mercury* declared. In a scene played out across the nation, a large audience gathered in the West Wyalong (NSW) Soldiers' Club Rooms to

celebrate the return of local men. ‘Those who had gone away as boys had returned as men, and the men had come back even greater men’, the president of the West Wyalong Progress Association declared.[5] ‘Quaama (NSW) has never before had such a night’, *The Cobargo Chronicle* reported on the exuberant homecoming, ‘no lukewarm welcome’, of local boys including Privates Harry Horne, Vern and Doug Inskip and Kevin Went.[6]

Much had changed during the Diggers’ absence abroad. Private Allan Anderson, whom we remember ‘coughing and choking’ in an Egyptian dust storm, ‘found that the brown-out that had been generally imposed was more difficult to cope with than the Syrian blackness of complete blackouts.’[7]

Homecomings might perplex. A knock on a familiar door. It opens to a family anticipating a soldier’s arrival, but with no idea of a time. Entering his home, dumping a heavy kit, he is struck by how his children have grown, how furniture may have been rearranged, how rationing had bit, how their wives had adjusted in their absence. ‘Perhaps you are a little incoherent at first’, a Digger shared.

Neither of you know just what to say. It is enough that you are home. Then, after you settle down a bit comes question after question with mostly negligible answers, for while you are finding words to reply one question, another is being fired at you.[8]

Not every AIF serviceman felt welcome. Many Diggers turned to the bottle in the company of their pals; newspapers carried regular stories of public drunkenness and divorce.

American servicemen were conspicuous with their smart uniforms and Australian girlfriends. Resentment grew. The so-called ‘Battle of Brisbane’ had been fought the previous November, similar ‘stoushes’ would follow.

Though it was an offence for service personnel to correspond directly with the press, Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* carried a letter the previous September from a private, ‘a member of an infantry unit which recently returned from the Middle East’. It carried a soldier’s plea for respect and understanding.

... we did not return as conquering heroes. Our victories mostly lie ahead of us. But we did take no mean part in the victories recorded by Allied arms. We did not expect to be lionised. We returned to Australia in the course of our duty and expected to go straight on with the job. But we did not expect

to be treated to a storm of criticism. Scarcely a day passes but some 'public-minded' citizen airs his views, saying that we are drunken, untidy, undisciplined and the good Lord knows what else. It seems to me, therefore, that we at least merit an opportunity to reply to it. To begin with, we are soldiers. The essence of our task is to kill, maim, cripple or destroy our enemy and all his works. This killing is a dirty business; and can only be done by rough, brutal, violent men. The object of our training is to transform us from normal civilians into good soldiers, that is, good killers. If we are to make good soldiers, then our training, as well as teaching us the mechanics of slaughter, must be such as to break down many of those finer instincts which go to make up a good gentleman. It must set up in us a predilection for violence, a willingness to destroy which is foreign to our normal inclinations. In short, we must become to some extent, brutalised. This brutality is not something which may be put on and off like a cloak. It is an integral part of our make-up and as much a part of our fighting equipment as a Tommy gun. To many readers this may be unpalatable. Unfortunately, it is true in the light of these facts and the added one that it is in defence of Australia's normal standards, as well as the lives and property of her citizens that we have accepted this measure of brutalisation, a little charity in criticism, would not be amiss. What is this criticism, anyhow? We drink? Yes, we do. And sometimes some of us drink to excess. It is regrettable, but it has always been a characteristic of Anglo-Saxon extraction. They say it interferes with our efficiency. Most of us have 3/- a day to spend on ourselves. If we spent it all on booze I doubt if it would hurt us very much. But out of that 3/- we have to buy personal toilet necessities and tobacco at canteen prices. I think the matter of efficiency, may be safely left in the hands of our Higher Command. They say we are untidy. Well, we wear an issue uniform in 99.9 per cent of cases in the regulation manner, so if we are untidy, excuse us! They say we are undisciplined. I wonder if we really are. We do not salute very much, but we do as we are told. Our officers know that they can rely on us for unquestioning obedience whenever it is required. Discipline does not consist entirely of saluting. Rather it is a willingness to obey orders at all times, no matter what the cost. So far our discipline in that respect has not broken down. This is not an apologia for the background. Experience has shown that he is generally of little use in action, if he gets that far. Nor is it a denial of our faults. By normal civilian standards they are legion. But it is

a plea for a little charity in judgment of a body of men who are doing a very necessary, but very unpleasant public duty. If you find us rough and uncouth, remember that those qualities may be useful in the near future. If you see a drunken soldier, do not despise him too much. He will not always be drunk and though you see him in depths of degradation, he may reach a height of self-sacrifice which you will never know, if he has not already done so. Some day he may stand between you and a soldier of another nation who has worse habits than drunkenness. Before you criticise our discipline ask yourself if your own civilian discipline is all that it might be. Have you given to the war effort the whole of your energies without thought of self! If you have not, you have not the right to criticise the soldier who has. If you go about your business striving for sectional, political or financial advantage, then, drunk or not, he is a better man than you. Look at your own discipline. Clean up your streets and bar parlours. There are menaces there more likely to impair the fight in efficiency of the soldier than all the beer that was ever brewed. By all means let the troops have their beer. It is far better for them than the 'rot gut' which is on tap when the beer runs out. Coupons? Don't make us laugh! As for control, I am on dangerous ground in discussing the Provost Corps. But let me suggest that the Army is quite capable of looking after its bad boys. They did so in foreign countries and will soon clean up any irregularities at home. In the meanwhile, in the public interest, a little less accent of the misdeeds of a few and a little more recognition of the sterling qualities of the many men under arms in Australia would be more helpful to morale than this continual disparagement. After all we are Australians, and once were civilians. After the war some of us may be civilians again. When that time comes, we will shed our soldiers' habits. Until that time comes those habits, good and bad, are part and parcel of us.[9]

* * *

Private Kenneth Moses (2/4th Battalion), whom we met shortly after enlisting, then exclaiming 'It's a wonderful life', had served in nine battles including Bardia, Tobruk, Greece and Crete. 'You know what it is like', he reflected,

when you are in the front you wish you were back behind the lines having a spell, and then, when you are back, things become so quiet that you pray for the day when you are fit again and can re-join your unit.

Discharged on 16 September 1942 as 'medically unfit for service not occasioned by his own default' following recurrent bouts of severe bronchitis, Moses marched in the 1955 Sydney Anzac Day Parade – 'the proudest day of my life.'

I marched behind a mate of mine, [Edward] Ned Kenna, VC, through the city. We marched because we, as members of the 2/4th Infantry Battalion, tried to tell those people behind the barricades what we had done. There were only 13 of us.[10]

Today there are none. Lest we forget.

A pained smile from Private George Stockdale (2/23rd Battalion) after disembarking from a hospital ship. The 23-year-old farm labourer from Traralgon (Vic) was wounded in action on 11 July 1941 with injuries to his left knee, chest and arm. Stockdale was discharged on 29 March 1943. (Argus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, State Library of Victoria)

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Argus (Melbourne)
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Australasian (Melbourne)
Australian Women's Weekly (Sydney)
Bacchus Marsh Express (Vic.)
Balonne Beacon (St George, Qld)
Barrier Miner (Broken Hill, NSW)
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Border Morning Mail (Albury, NSW)
Border Watch (Mount Gambier, SA)
Bowen Independent (Qld)
Braidwood Dispatch and Mining Journal (NSW)
Braidwood Review and District Advocate (NSW)
Bunyip (Gawler, SA)
Cairns Post (Qld)
Camden News (NSW)
Canberra Times (ACT)
Carbargo Chronicle (NSW)
Catholic Freeman's Journal (Sydney)
Catholic Press (Sydney)
Catholic Weekly (Sydney)
Central Queensland Herald (Rockhampton)
Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder (NSW)
Chronicle (Adelaide)
Cloncurry Advocate (Qld)
Cobram Courier (Vic.)
Coffs Harbour Advocate (NSW)
Coolgardie Miner (WA)
Cootamundra Herald (NSW)
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Courier-Mail (Brisbane)
Crookwell Gazette (NSW)
Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate (Parramatta, NSW)
Daily Advertiser (Wagga Wagga, NSW)
Daily Examiner (Grafton, NSW)
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Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser (NSW)
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Mail (Adelaide)
Manilla Express (NSW)
Manjimup and Warren Times (WA)
Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales
Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser (Qld)
Melton Express (Vic.)
Mercury (Hobart)
Mirror (Perth)
Molong Express and Western District Advertiser (NSW)

Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, Qld)
Morwell Advertiser (Vic.)
Mount Barker and Denmark Record (Albany, WA)
Mount Magnet Leader and Youanmi Miner (WA)
Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative (NSW)
Murray Pioneer (Renmark, SA)
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Murrumbidgee Irrigator (Leeton, NSW)
Murrumburrah Signal and County of Harden Advocate (NSW)
Muswellbrook Chronicle (NSW)
Narrandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser (NSW)
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Newcastle Sun (NSW)
News (Adelaide)
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North-Western Watchman (Coonabarabran, NSW)
Northam Advertiser (WA)
Northern Argus (Clare, SA)
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Northern Grazier and Miner (Leonora, WA)
Northern Miner (Charters Towers, Qld)
Northern Star (Lismore, NSW)
Ouyen Mail (Vic.)
Pingelly-Brookton Leader (WA)
Pinnaroo and Border Times (SA)
Pix (Sydney)
Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate (NSW)
Portland Guardian (Vic.)
Propeller (Hurstville, NSW)
Queensland Times (Ipswich)
Record (Emerald Hill, Vic.)
Recorder (Port Pirie, SA)
Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser (NSW)
Riverina Recorder (Balranald, NSW)
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Scone Advocate (NSW)
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South Eastern Times (Millicent, SA)
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Southern Sentinel (Mount Barker, SA)
St George Call (Kogarah, NSW)
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Sunday Mail (Brisbane)
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Times and Northern Advertiser (Peterborough, SA)
Townsville Daily Bulletin (Qld)
Transcontinental (Port Augusta, SA)
Truth (Brisbane)
Tumut and Adelong Times (NSW)
Uralla Times (NSW)
Wagin Argus and Arthur, Dumbleyung, Lake Grace Express (WA)
Warialda Standard and Northern Districts' Advertiser (NSW)
Warwick Daily News (Qld)
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Wellington Times (NSW)
West Australian (Perth)
West Coast Recorder (Port Lincoln, SA)
West Coast Sentinel (Streaky Bay, SA)
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Williamstown Chronicle (Vic.)
Wiluna Miner (WA)
Windsor and Richmond Gazette (NSW)
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VX5682	Tope, William John
NX5851	Tout, Hugh Albernest
NX57	Travers, William Holmes

SX6894	Trish, Thomas Victor
SX8293	Tuit, Walter James
VX709	Tulloch, Ormond Porter
WX1144	Vincent, Thomas Chalker Victor
VX19855	Vyner, Percy
NX13640	Wall, Donald Douglas
QX8509	Wall, John William
VX36266	Wapling, Frederick Henry
VX186	Warfe, George Radford
NX1574	Waters, Roy Sidney Montague
NX23179	Watkins, Leslie William
NX3651	Weaver, Edgar Alan
NX1270	Webb, John Robert
NX20894	Webster, Harry Edward Andrew
NX8861	Weekes, Alister Graham
VX10253	Weir, Arnold Hadwin
NX22383	Welch, Cyril Edward
NX60431	Went, Kevin Joseph
VX15450	Westerman, Trevor Arthur
WX3384	Wheeler, Reginald John
QX7626	Wilesmith, Arthur William
NX18734	Williams, Harry Fenton
NX71537	Williams, William Arthur Leslie
WX1923	Williams, Gordon Ernest
VX3714	Wilson, Lawson
WX8389	Wilson, Alfred Donald
VX28757	Windlow, Les Walter
NX2687	Wiseman, Laban William
NX13717	Woollams, Frederick Charles
VX972	Wortham, Phillip Francis
WX7367	Yates, George Henry
NX1611	Young, George McEwan

ENDNOTES

Introduction

1 'THE OUTLOOK OF THE DIGGER', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 4 March 1941, p. 2. Percy Vyner, VX19855, was discharged on 19 August 1943.
2 'DON'TS & WHYS FOR 2nd A.I.F.', *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 4 January 1940, p. 9.
3 Bowd, K. 'How different is "different"? Australian country newspapers and development journalism', *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 14, 2003, pp. 117–130.
4 'SOLDIERS' LETTERS', *Bairnsdale Advertiser and Tambo and Omeo Chronicle* (Vic.), 13 January 1942, p. 1. John Reeve, VX47665, was discharged on 23 August 1945.
5 'Spring Vale', *The Dandenong Journa*l (Vic.), 28 October 1942, p. 6. Roy Selleck, VX41465, was discharged on 23 August 1943.
6 'An Interesting Letter From Harley Lang', *The Times and Northern Advertiser* (Peterborough, SA), 1 August 1941, p. 4. Hubert Lang, SX7504, was killed on 5 May 1942.
7 AWM 2/15 Jan to April; AWM 52 2/2/7/12 – 6 Australian Division Cavalry Regiment, April–May 1941.
8 'RESCUES COMRADE', *The Daily News* (Perth), 5 September 1941, p. 7. Richard Kelly, WX4630, was discharged on 6 February 1946. Stanley Booth, WX6684, was discharged on 19 September 1945.
9 https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/journal/j29/civils
10 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.*
11 'WITH THE A.I.F. IN MIDDLE EAST', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 25 June 1941, p. 2.
12 'Pte, Boxer Tells of Last Fight at Tobruk', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 7 July 1941.
13 'LETTERS FROM ABROAD', *Albury Banner Wodonga Express and Riverina Stock Journal* (NSW), 25 July, p. 25. Alan Hempel, VX23993, died on 4 July 1941.
14 'A TRIBUTE', *Portland Guardian* (Vic.), 23 October 1941, p. 2. Garnet 'Ron' Moyle, VX43497, was discharged on 5 December 1945. Frederick Wapling, VX36266, died on 24 August 1941.
15 'Desert Heat', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 5 September 1941, p. 5.
16 'Letter From Private Allan Ball', *Kyabram Free Press* and *Rodney and Deakin Shire Advocate* (Vic.), 3 June 1941, p. 3. Allan Ernest Ball, VX21472, was discharged on 6 December 1945.
17 'A.I.F. BREAK-THROUGH AT EL-ALAMEIN.', *Melton Express* (Vic.), 2 January 1943, p. 1. Laurence Cowling, NX21287, was discharged on 19 November 1945.
18 'Service In Tobruk Wadi', *Live Wire* (Yallourn, Vic.), 12 November 1941, p. 7.
19 'Italian's Treachery', *The Northern Champion* (Taree, NSW), 31 May 1941, p. 7.
20 NAA: B883, NX15485.
21 'NURSE'S LETTER', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 1 October 1940, p. 3.
22 'A.I.F. Boys in North Africa Look Like New Race', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 3 November 1941, p. 3. Phillip Ferrier, SX9251, was discharged on 22 November 1945.

23 ‘Letter from Tobruk’, *The Herald* (Melbourne), 30 August 1941, p. 14.
24 ‘THEY ALWAYS GET THEIR MAN’, *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 23 October 1941, p. 4.
25 ‘Mail Before Food, Tobruk Men Think’, *The Herald* (Melbourne), 6 September 1941, p. 2.
26 ‘Postman – Most Popular Man in the Desert’, *The Australasian* (Melbourne), 6 September 1941, p. 6.
27 ‘ON LEAVE IN EGYPT’, *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 6 October 1941, p. 8. Kenneth Jolliffe, TX3421, was discharged on 9 November 1944.
28 ‘REPROACHFUL LETTERS’, *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld.), 3 July 1942, p. 2
29 ‘White Feathers To Soldiers In Mid. East’, *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 12 May 1942, p. 2.
30 *Ibid.*
31 ‘MIDDLE EAST SOLDIER GETS WHITE FEATHERS’, *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers’ Advocate* (Parramatta), 25 November 1942, p. 3. Terence Toomey, NX73056, was discharged on 18 December 1945.
32 ‘ALBURY’S OWN FOUND ITS ROAD IN TOBRUK’, *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 29 November 1941, p. 4.

Chapter 1

1 ‘It is my melancholy duty ... Australia is at war’, *The Canberra Times* (ACT), 2 February 1995, p. 13.
2 ‘MELBOURNE, MONDAY’, *The Age* (Melbourne), 4 September 1939, p. 10.
3 ‘OUR BRISBANE LETTER’, *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (Qld), 8 September 1939, p. 3.
4 ‘WAR’, *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* (NSW), 4 September 1939, p. 4.
5 ‘IN KALGOORLIE’, *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA), 4 September 1939, p. 4.
6 ‘THE CALL WILL BE ANSWERED’, *The Argus* (Melbourne), 4 September 1939, p. 6.
7 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 38; ‘THE NEW A.I.F.’, *York Chronicle* (WA), 22 September 1939, p. 2.
8 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 38.
9 ‘SECOND A.I.F.’, *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 27 December 1939, p. 4.
10 ‘The Second A.I.F.’, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* (NSW), 16 October 1939, p. 6; ‘THE SECOND A.I.F.’, *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 6 December 1939, p. 4; ‘ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 12 August, p. 12.
11 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 56.
12 ‘SECOND A.I.F. RECRUITING’, *Shepparton Advertiser* (Vic.), 13 October 1939, p. 7.
13 ‘18-YEAR-OLD TERRY ROWEN IN A.I.F.’, *West Coast Sentinel* (Streaky Bay, SA), 17 May 1940, p. 1. Leo’s attempt was unsuccessful on this occasion, with records showing that he later enlisted on 30 April 1943, just shy of his 21st birthday. Leo Terrance Rowen, SX2784, was discharged on 1 January 1946.
14 ‘YOUTHS JOIN A.I.F.’, *The North-Western Watchman* (Coonabarabran, NSW), 27 June 1940, p. 6.
15 ‘BOYS TRY TO JOIN A.I.F.’, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* (NSW), 5 July 1940, p. 9
16 ‘OUT AMONG the PEOPLE’, *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 28 August 1941, p. 9.
17 ‘Missing butcher-boy turns up at Tobruk’, *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 23 August 1941, p. 9. Edwin Raymond Days, NX16436, was discharged on 5 December 1945.
18 ‘BOYS TRY TO JOIN A.I.F.’, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* (NSW), 5 July 1940, p. 9.
19 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.*

20 'A.I.F. Recruiting is Active', *Cairns Post* (Qld), 11 November 1939, p. 6.
21 'SOLDIERS IN SHORTS', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW), 15 December 1939, p. 6. 'Final Fight Was His Finest', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), October 1941, p. 8. Charles Edward Pickrang, QX4394, recovered from his wounds and was discharged on 22 August 1945.
22 Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 153.
23 'A.I.F. WILL SOON EMBARK', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 1 December 1939, p. 4.
24 'A.I.F. EYE TEST GIVES SEVERAL CHANCES', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 12 December 1940, p. 5.
25 'RECRUITS FOR A.I.F.', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 19 March 1940, p. 12.
26 'PUZZLE IN A.I.F. REJECTION', *The Sun* (Sydney), 7 December 1939, p. 11.
27 'DENTAL EXAM', *Glen Innes Examiner* (NSW), 9 December 1939, p. 1.
28 'With the Second A.I.F.', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 22 December 1939, p. 2.
29 'A.I.F. DISCHARGES', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 14 November 1939, p. 4.
30 'OFFICERS FOR NEW A.I.F.', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 3 October 1939, p. 10. The number allocated to the states for the 6th Division were: NSW – 292 officers and 6,201 other ranks; Victoria – 252 officers and 5816 other ranks; Western Australia – 52 officers and 1,226 other ranks; Tasmania – 36 officers and 831 other ranks; Northern Territory – 5 officers and 111 other ranks. 'A.I.F. 20,000', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 29 September 1939, p. 2.
31 'ITALIANS APPLY FOR A.I.F.', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 5 December 1939, p. 3.
32 'THE SECOND A.I.F.', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 6 December 1939, p. 4.
33 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.*
34 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 57.
35 'Why They Joined Second A.I.F', *The Daily News* (Perth), 10 November 1939, p. 6.
36 'A DAY IN LIFE OF RECRUIT: Diggers In Training At Northam', *Sunday Times* (Perth), 4 August 1940, p. 7.
37 'Why They Joined Second A.I.F', *The Daily News* (Perth), 10 November 1939, p. 6.
38 'How Raw 6,000 Became Soldiers', *Pix*, 14 December 1939, p. 16.
39 Marshall, ed. *Nulli Secundus Log*, p. 11. Kenneth Curtis, NX1343, was discharged in November 1944.
40 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 60.
41 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.*
42 *Ibid*.
43 'LIFE IN A MILITARY CAMP', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 28 March 1940, p. 8.
44 'BEER-DRINKING MASCOT', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 19 February 1940, p. 11; 'Goat is A.I.F. Mascot', *News* (Adelaide), 25 November 1939, p. 7; '"FERDY THE COW" – CAMP MASCOT', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 26 October, p. 2.
45 'TROOPS LEAVE SOON', *News* (Adelaide), 29 November 1939, p. 1.
46 AWM 371 94/0954 MSS1528. Ernest Edward Osbourne, NX1542, was discharged on 6 September 1945.
47 'Gaol For Anti-War Urgers', *The Daily News* (Perth), 19 September 1939, p. 7.
48 'OPPOSITION TO WAR', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW), 15 December 1939, p. 20.
49 'OPPOSITION TO WAR', *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 19 October 1939, p. 18.
50 'Opposition from Quakers', *The West Australian* (Perth), 20 June 1939, p. 8.

51 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.*
52 'A.I.F. SPIRIT TYPIFIED IN SOLDIER'S LETTER BEFORE FINAL LEAVE', *The Herald* (Melbourne, Vic.), 15 February 1940, p. 7.
53 'SECOND A.I.F. MEN FAREWELLED', *North-Eastern Advertiser* (Scottsdale, Tas.), 8 December 1939, p. 3. Maxwell Krushka, TX460, was discharged on 10 November 1945; Albert Chilcott, TX466, was discharged on 18 May 1940.
54 'VALEDICTORY', *Border Watch* (Mount Gambier, SA), 14 September 1940, p. 3.
55 'DAYSDALE BROTHERS FAREWELLED', *The Corowa Free Press* (NSW), 30 January 1940, p. 3. Both brothers survived the war. Wallace Duncan, VX6589, was discharged on 14 December 1944. Gordon Duncan, VX6503, was discharged in July 1948.
56 'WELCOME TO 1940', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 1 January 1940, p. 7.
57 'Old Diggers Wish New A.I.F. "Best Of Luck"', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 25 December 1939, p. 5. Arthur Albert McTague, NX8530, was court-martialled on 12 May 1943 and discharged five months later.

Chapter 2

1 'SECOND A.I.F CHEERED THROUGH CITY', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 5 January 1939, p. 9.
2 'How Sydney Said Its Good-byes', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 12 February 1940, p. 3.
3 'I saw them sail away', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 24 February 1940, p. 31. Kenneth Moses, NX9670, was discharged on 16 September 1942; Private Stanley George Dean, NX9638, was discharged on 24 February 1941; Captain Lancelot Martin Cutcliffe, NX63, was discharged on 19 October 1941.
4 'How Sydney Said Its Good-byes', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 12 February 1940, p. 3.
5 'I saw them sail away', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 24 February 1940, p. 31.
6 'How Sydney Said Its Good-byes', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 12 February 1940, p. 3.
7 'Interesting Letter', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 9 June 1941, p. 3. Sergeant Allan James Anderson, NX57833, was discharged from the 16th Infantry Brigade in December 1945.
8 'AUSTRALIANS IN PALESTINE', *The Catholic Press* (Sydney), 26 September 1940, p. 5. Jack Antony, NX5335, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his discharge in January 1946.
9 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 69. Roland Hoffman, NX3832, later died in England, aged 38 years, on 3 August 1945 following self-inflicted wounds after his release from a German POW camp. Hoffman was captured in Crete during the 1941 invasion.
10 Marshall, ed., *Nulli Secundus Log*, p. 14.
11 'Interesting Letter From Soldier', *Whyalla News* (SA), 24 January 1941, p. 5. Cyril Hughes, SX4379, was discharged on 27 September 1945.
12 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.*
13 Marshall, ed., *Nulli Secundus Log,* p. 15.
14 'Letter from Overseas', *Manjimup and Warren Times* (WA), 1 July 1942, p. 5. George Yates, WX7367, was discharged in October 1944.
15 Badman, *North Africa 1940–1942*, p. 12.
16 'GNR. R. E. KEAST MEETS OTHER RIVER MEN', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 29 January 1942, p. 3. Ronald Edward Keast SX11380 was discharged on 13 December 1945.
17 'LETTERS from the A.I.F.', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 27 July 1940, p. 18.

18 '"CHIN UP AND DON'T WORRY"', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 11 July 1941, p. 4. Hector Riddel, QX13156, was killed serving in the 2/25th Battalion in Syria on 17 June 1941.
19 'Fancy Meals On Troop Ships', *Sunday Times* (Perth), 23 June 1940, p. 3.
20 'NEWCASTLE CHAPLAIN WITH A.I.F.', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 19 March 1940, p. 9
21 'W.A. SOLDIER', *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), 8 April 1940, p. 4.
22 'ANZAC DAY ON A TROOPSHIP', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 5 June 1940, p. 7.
23 'Aboard a Luxury Liner', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 29 August 1940, p. 10. Eloi Haynes D'Alton, SX832, was discharged on 14 September 1945.
24 'LIFE ON A TROOPSHIP', *Mount Barker and Denmark Record* (Albany, WA), 29 July 1940, p. 3.
25 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.*
26 Marshall, ed. *Nulli Secundus Log*, p. 15.
27 'At Tobruk', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 18 October 1941, p. 4. Sydney Perry Newcomb, QX6238, was discharged on 3 October 1945.
28 'LETTERS FROM OUR FIGHTING-FORCES', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 31 March 1941, p. 2. Corporal Hollister James Dean, SX5282, was killed in action on 2 October 1943.
29 'WHEN A.I.F. HAD SHORE LEAVE', *Recorder* (Port Pirie, SA), 27 July 1940, p. 2. Alfred 'Rex' Mallyon, SX461, was discharged on 12 August 1946.
30 'Local Boys in Palestine', *Coolgardie Miner* (WA), 17 October 1940, p. 2. Private Frederick Holt, WX2207, was discharged in October 1945. Arthur Ross Domney, WX2210, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his discharge in September 1945.
31 'SOLDIERS' LETTERS', *The Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate* (NSW), 1 February 1941, p. 1. Private Harry Dick, NX20601, born in Port Macquarie (NSW) was discharged in October 1945.
32 'Letter From Soldier', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 17 January 1941, p. 2. Harry Webster, NX20894, was discharged from the 2/13th Battalion in June 1944.
33 'Padre's Letter From Middle East', *Melton Express* (Vic.), 7 June 1941, p. 1.
34 'Across to Palestine', *The Northern Champion* (Taree, NSW), 11 October 1941, p. 6. Harold Hammond, NX7334, was discharged on 17 November 1945.
35 'W.A. SOLDIER', *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), 8 April 1940, p. 4.
36 'At Tobruk', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 18 October 1941, p. 4.
37 'Lieut. J. B. Ifould writes to a friend –', *Bunyip* (Gawler, SA), 25 July 1941, p. 5. John Ifould, SX9167, from Adelaide, was later captured by the Japanese and held on Java. Ifould was discharged in January 1946.
38 'THE SECOND A.I.F.', *The West Australian* (Perth), 14 February 1940, p. 13.
39 *Ibid.*
40 'JUNEE SOLDIER'S RETURN', *Cootamundra Herald* (NSW), 8 September 1941, p. 3. Frank O'Donnell, NX15830, was discharged on 13 October 1941.

Chapter 3

1 'In Palestine', *The Macleay Chronicle* (Kempsey, NSW), 26 June 1940, p. 1.
2 'NEWS FROM ABROAD, "Q.47" Tells of Palestine', *Western Mail* (Perth), 14 November 1940, p. 16.; 'WITH THE A.I.F. IN PALESTINE', *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, NSW), 14 May 1940, p. 4; 'Letter from Palestine', *The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* (Taree, NSW), 6 April 1940, p. 5. Arthur Tillott, WX3595, was discharged from the 2/7th Field Ambulance in June 1946; Robert Connors, NX1557, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his discharge in November 1945.

3 Marshall, ed., *Nulli Secundus Log*, p. 21. Archibald McLellan, NX1405, was discharged in January 1946.
4 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 72.
5 'Train Bell In Palestine', *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 20 July 1940, p. 42.
6 'A.I.F. MEN', *The Daily News* (Perth), 5 March 1940, p. 16; John Hetherington, 'First It Was Jackals: Now It's Dogs', *The Mail* (Adelaide, SA), 23 March 1940, p. 5.
7 John Hetherington, 'First It Was Jackals: Now It's Dogs', *The Mail* (Adelaide), 23 March 1940, p. 5.
8 'NEWS FROM ABROAD, "Q.47" Tells of Palestine', *Western Mail* (Perth), 14 November 1940, p. 16.
9 'WITH THE A.I.F. ABROAD', *The Henty Observer and Culcairn Shire Register* (NSW), 22 November 1940, p. 3. Raymond Bahr, VX27516, was discharged in November 1945.
10 'DON'TS & WHYS FOR 2nd A.I.F.', *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 4 January 1940, p. 9; 'WITH AN AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER FROM TUMUT ON LEAVE', *The Tumut and Adelong Times* (NSW), 26 November 1940, p. 4.
11 'LETTER FROM PALESTINE', *The Wingham Chronicle and Manning River Observer* (NSW), 5 April 1940, p. 1; Marshall, ed., *Nulli Secundus Log*, p. 21; 'PALESTINE RIOTS', *The Mercury* (Hobart), 20 May 1940, p. 6. Eric Martin, NX1564, joined the RAF after being discharged from the AIF on 27 February 1942.
12 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 74.
13 'Second A.I.F. Intrigued With Quaint Life of Arab Town', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 21 March 1940, p. 3.
14 'ARMY LIFE GREAT', *The West Wyalong Advocate* (NSW), 13 May 1940, p. 5. Clarence Beattie, NX3296, was discharged on 6 December 1943.
15 'MORE SIDELIGHTS FROM PALESTINE', *Singleton Argus* (NSW), 2 September 1940, p. 2. John Skinner, NX1448, was discharged in June 1945.
16 'SOLDIER'S LETTER'', *The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* (Taree, NSW), 19 June 1940, p. 2. Vincent Pinchin, NX1568, was discharged in October 1945. Captured in Greece, he was held at Stutthof-Sztutowo, Stalag XVIIIA, XIIIC, XXB, AAA and Stalag 344 as POW number 3375 RTA.
17 'Letter Home', *The Scone Advocate* (NSW), 10 June 1941, p. 2. Cecil McNamara, NX1416, was discharged on 9 June 1944.
18 'LETTER FROM PALESTINE', *The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* (Taree, NSW), 29 May 1940, p. 3. Thomas Bradley, NX8838, was discharged on 13 August 1945.
19 'SOLDIER'S LETTER FROM PALESTINE', *The Hebrew Standard of Australasia* (Sydney), 16 May 1940, p. 2. Albert Hertzberg, NX8711, was discharged in January 1963.
20 'Every Man Needed, Says A.I.F Man', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 10 June 1941, p. 9.
21 'WITH THE 2ND A.I.F.', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 18 April 1940, p. 10. Eric Maxwell, NX2333, was discharged in August 1945; 'Tel Aviv', *Nepean Times* (Penrith, NSW), 9 May 1940, p. 2. Albert Harrison, NX5236, was discharged in January 1944; 'TWO REFUGEE SHIPS', *The West Wyalong Advocate* (NSW), 16 December 1940, p. 2. Reginald 'Rex' Robberds, NX15534, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his discharge in November 1945.
22 'INTERESTING LETTER', *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (NSW), 18 October 1940, p. 7; 'VITAL BATTLE OF THE BULGE', *The Age* (Melbourne), 21 May 1940, p. 6; 'OUR GUM TREES', *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser* (NSW), 9 August 1932, p. 1; 'LETTERS FROM PALESTINE', *Crookwell Gazette* (NSW), 17 April 1940, p. 3.

Born in Brazil, John Mann, NX3955, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his discharge in December 1945.

23 'Palestine An Eye-Opener', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 22 April 1941, p. 2.

24 '128 Degrees In Desert', *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (Leeton, NSW), 24 June 1941, p.4. Ronald Adams, NX54398, was discharged on 30 December 1943.

25 'Letter from Palestine', *The Northern Champion* (Taree, NSW), 8 May 1940, p. 1. Duncan Goslett, NX118, was awarded the Military Cross.

26 'LETTERS FROM PALESTINE', *Crookwell Gazette* (NSW), 19 June 1940, p. 6. Edward Graham, NX4509, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his discharge in September 1945.

27 'From Middle East', *Alexandra and Yea Standard and Yarck, Gobur, Thornton and Acheron Express* (Vic.), 13 December 1940, p. 4. Carl Hyne, VX21792, was discharged on 5 September 1945.

28 'LETTERS FROM PALESTINE', *Crookwell Gazette* (NSW), 19 June 1940, p. 6. William Carmichael, NX4492, died on 13 September 1943.

29 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 74; 'Letters from Palestine', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 8 August 1940, p. 3; 'Aussie in Palestine'', *Western Mail* (Perth), 5 December 1940, p. 2. James 'Jim' Roberts, SX805, was discharged on 24 September 1945.

30 'NURSE'S LETTER', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 1 October 1940, p. 3. Mona Prindable, NX305, was discharged on 5 December 1946.

31 'SOLDIERS' LETTERS', *Huon and Derwent Times* (Tas.), 29 August 1940, p. 2. Arthur Smith, TX90, was discharged in January 1945.

32 'With the A.I.F.', *Murrumburrah Signal and County of Harden Advocate* (NSW), 14 November 1940, p. 1. Laurence Hodges, VX9786, was discharged in November 1945.

33 Stockings, 'The Anzac Legend and the Battle of Bardia', *War In History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 2010), p. 101.

34 'SURF REEL FOR A.I.F', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 6 April 1940, p. 3; 'Kiama Digger', *The Kiama Reporter and Illawarra Journal* (NSW), 28 August 1940, p. 4.

35 'A.I.F. IN PALESTINE', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 25 December 1940, p. 4.

36 John Hetherington, 'AIF SURF TEAMS THRILL GAZA', *The Daily News* (Perth), 15 July 1940, p. 3.

37 'Pastime in Palestine'', *Western Mail* (Perth), 7 November 1940, p. 2.

38 'A.I.F. IN PALESTINE', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 25 December 1940, p. 4; 'RACE MEETING IN PALESTINE', *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (Leeton, NSW), 27 September 1940, p. 4.

39 'A RACE MEETING IN PALESTINE', *Singleton Argus* (NSW), 15 November 1940, p. 8, 'Racing in Palestine', *Sunday Times* (Perth), 14 April 1940, p. 15. Patrick Maher, VX8878, was discharged in September 1945.

40 'A.I.F. IN PALESTINE', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 25 December 1940, p. 4.

41 'FIRST A.I.F. MAN TO DIE ON ACTIVE SERVICE', *Record* (Emerald Hill, Vic.), 21 September 1940, p. 1. Keith McMillian, VX1061 lies buried at the Gaza War Cemetery.

42 'Killed in Raid', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 22 October 1940, p. 3. Alexander Sheppard, NX68, was discharged in June 1949.

43 'Aussie in Palestine', *Western Mail* (Perth), 5 December 1940, p. 2.

44 'FROM SOMEWHERE IN PALESTINE'', *The Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser* (NSW), 30 September 1940, p. 3.

45 'DESERT WARFARE', *The Northern Miner* (Charters Towers, Qld), 15 April 1941, p. 1. George Edwards, QX8620, died of injuries on 14 June 1941.

46 'NAZI AIM IN HOLLAND AND BELGIUM', *The Age* (Melbourne), 15 May 1940, p. 11.
47 'An Australian in Palestine', *Riverina Recorder* (Balranald, Moulamein, NSW), 24 August 1940, p. 3.
48 Connell, *Wavell: Scholar and Soldier*, p. 211.
49 Segré, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life*, p. 387.
50 'MUSSOLINI CRAWLS INTO THE FIGHT FOR LOOT', *The Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser* (NSW), 11 July 1940, p. 1.
51 Marshall, ed., *Nulli Secundus Log*, p. 22.
52 Reg. A. Glennie, 'A.I.F. BEING MOULDED IN PALESTINE', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW), 25 April 1940, p. 9.
53 'INTERESTING LETTER', *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (NSW), 18 October 1940, p. 7.
54 'DIGGERS SOON IN FIGHT', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 1 October 1940, p. 1.
55 'LETTER FROM PALESTINE', *The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* (Taree, NSW), 31 July 1940, p. 1. Graham Weekes, NX8861, was discharged in October 1944.
56 'LETTERS from the A.I.F.', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 21 September 1940, p. 14.
57 1940 'AUSTRALIANS "ITCHING" TO FIGHT', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 19 September 1940, p. 4. Walter Newton, VX6530, was discharged on 24 September 1944.

Chapter 4

1 'An Editorial', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 12 October 1940, p. 14.
2 'Letter Home', *The Scone Advocate* (NSW), 10 June 1941, p. 2.
3 'DIGGER'S SON IN THE DESERT', *The Propeller* (Hurstville, NSW), 31 October 1940, p. 8. Ronald McIntosh, NX7368, was discharged in October 1945.
4 'Somewhere in the Western Desert', *Singleton Argus* (NSW), 10 January 1941, p. 8.
5 John Hetherington, 'A.I.F. Guard Vital Desert Post', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 12 October 1940, p. 2; https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hetherington-jack-aikman-john-10494
6 'Weird Sights of the Desert', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 8 December 1941, p. 3. Donald Birdsey, SX7107, was discharged in November 1945.
7 'PREPARED FOR ACTION', *The Age* (Melbourne), 23 September 1940, p. 6.
8 'Soldiers Tell of Life Abroad', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 18 December 1940, p. 2. Arthur Skene, NX15150, was discharged on 26 April 1946.
9 G. E. W. Harriott, 'MASTERY OF DESERT', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 23 September, p. 4.
10 'LEAVE IN CAIRO', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 16 July 1941, p. 1. Dan George, NX12691, born on Thursday Island, was discharged in September 1943.
11 'OLD SOLDIER', *Glen Innes Examiner* (NSW), 7 November 1940, p. 3.
12 https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/98/articletwo
13 'EGYPT', *Western Mail* (Perth), 20 February 1941, p. 4. Roy Mainstone, WX3623, was discharged on 1 October 1945.
14 'Interesting Letter', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 9 June 1941, p. 3.
15 'FROM MIDDLE EAST', *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), 6 March 1941, p. 5. Neville Roennfeldt, WX162, was discharged on 24 October 1945.
16 'SOLDIER WRITES HOME', *Kyabram Free Press and Rodney and Deakin Shire Advocate* (Vic.), 16 January 1942, p. 3. David Russell, VX44519, was discharged on 23 August 1943.

17 'Interesting Letter', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 9 June 1941, p. 3.
18 '"CAIRO IS A GREAT PLACE"', *The Corowa Free Press* (NSW), 29 October 1940, p. 2.
19 https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/98/articletwo
20 'CAIRO AND THE PYRAMIDS', *The Beaudesert Times* (Qld), 20 March 1942, p. 4.
21 'Soldier's Letter', *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 4 December 1941, p. 4.
22 'PTE. R. C. LANCE', *The West Wyalong Advocate* (NSW), 26 March 1942, p. 5. Robert Lance, NX21897, was discharged on 1 February 1946.
23 'Sale Soldier's Interesting Letter', *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 7 April 1941, p. 3. Leonard Pendlebury, VX5614, was later captured on Crete. He was discharged on 28 August 1945.
24 *The Diaries of Sergeant E. G. Edwards.* Cecil Burt, QX4620, died on 23 January 1941.
25 'DIGGERS SOON IN FIGHT', *The Sun* (Sydney), 30 September 1940, p. 2.
26 'THE GYPPOS STAGE A STRIKE', *Kapunda Herald* (SA), 20 March 1941, p. 3.
27 'Red Cross Praised', *Mount Barker and Denmark Record* (Albany, WA), 3 July 1941, p. 4. Janet Lindsay, W233424, was born in Freemantle, WA.
28 'THE A.I.F. ABROAD', *The Northam Advertiser* (WA), 30 April 1941, p. 3. Vernon Northwood, WX3405, was discharged in October 1946.
29 'ODE TO THE WESTERN DESERT', *Pinnaroo and Border Times* (SA), 4 December 1941, p. 4. Arnold Gregory, SX5669, was discharged in May 1944.
30 '2,000 Miles Across The Desert', *The Narrogin Observer* (WA), 3 May 1941, p. 6.
31 'Interesting Letter', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 9 June 1941, p. 3.
32 'Desert Dust Storm', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 4 April 1941, p. 6.
33 'Desert Sand Storms', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 3 March 1942, p. 2. Jack Bailey, NX10606, was discharged in March 1946.
34 G. E. W. Harriott, 'Mastery Of Digger', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 23 September 1940, p. 4.
35 'SANDS OF THE DESERT', *Wellington Times* (NSW), 5 June 1941, p. 7. Aubrey Davey, NX27148, was discharged in May 1945.
36 'Discomforts of the Near East', *News* (Adelaide, SA), 21 February 1941, p. 4.
37 'THE A.I.F. ABROAD', *The Northam Advertiser* (WA), 30 April 1941.
38 'Letter From Abroad', *Wodonga and Towong* Sentinel (Vic.), 28 February 1941, p. 2. Harold Phefley, VX15273, was discharged in December 1945; 'A.I.F. Finds Desert Dust as Bad as Bushfire Smoke', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane, Qld), 17 December 1940, p. 3.
39 'On The Libyan Lid', *Geraldton Guardian and Express* (WA), 14 October 1941, p. 1. Curwen Damyon, 250933, was discharged on 1 September 1943.
40 'Diggers Flight In Dust', *The Daily News* (Perth), 30 June 1941, p. 7. John Campbell, WX6075, was discharged in November 1945.
41 *Ibid*.
42 'HOME AGAIN', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 14 April 1941, p. 1. Born in Nottingham, England, John Wall, QX8509, was discharged on 16 May 1941.
43 'Dust-Bound Diggers', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 15 February 1941, p. 4. James Fearnley, QX6021, was discharged in October 1945.
44 'Sgt Harry Corneliusen's Word-Picture of Desert Campaign', *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (Leeton, NSW), 26 September, p. 4. Henry Corneliusen, VX44531, was discharged on 10 December 1945.
45 'AFTER DESERT BATTLE: ITALIAN PANIC', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 4 January 1941, p. 4. Harry Silk, 30028, was discharged on 31 October 1945.

46 John Hetherington, 'Australian Troops Dig Elaborate Trenches', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 25 October 1940, p. 2.
47 'DIGGERS' LETTERS', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 28 January 1941, p. 3. Raymond Foster, NX4357, was discharged on 27 August 1945.
48 'Another Letter From Mick May', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 5 November 1942, p. 2. John 'Mick' McGregor, NX24739, was discharged in 1945.
49 'The Western Desert', *The North-Western Watchman* (Coonabarabran), 31 July 1941, p. 9. Cecil Spillane, NX20907, was discharged on 26 October 1945.
50 Mitchelhill-Green, *Hitler's War In Africa*, p. 16.
51 'Punishment Enough for Musso To Make Him Live in Libya', *News* (Adelaide), 11 July 1941, p. 8.
52 Ian Fitchett, 'It is Cold in the Desert', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 26 December 1940, p. 2. Ronald Da Fonte, VX6566, was discharged on 3 October 1945.
53 'DOMINATING PATROLS Australian Troops Inherit Skill Of First A.I.F.', *The Mercury* (Hobart), 6 January 1941, p. 3.
54 'A Funny War', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 4 March 1941, p. 2. William Marshall, QX1468, was discharged in March 1946.
55 'NEWS FROM WESTERN DESERT', *The Scone Advocate* (NSW), 24 January, p. 3. Simon Parry, NX46037, was discharged in November 1945.
56 'Letter From Overseas', *Manjimup and Warren Times* (WA), 1 July 1942, p. 5. George Yates, WX7367, from Perth, was discharged in October 1944.
57 'NEWS FROM WESTERN DESERT', *The Scone Advocate* (NSW), 24 January 1941, p. 3.
58 'SOLDIER' LETTERS', *Cootamundra Herald* (NSW), 6 January 1941, p. 3. Harold Conkey, NX154, was discharged in May 1944.
59 'LOCAL LAD IN EGYPT', *The Wiluna Miner* (WA), 17 January 1941, p. 1. John Mott, WX959, born in Calcutta, India, was discharged in January 1946.
60 'Other Soldiers' Letters', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 3 July 1941, p. 3. John McIntyre, SX3841, was discharged in April 1945.
61 'DESERT LIFE', *Cairns Post* (Qld), 19 May 1941, p. 3. Arthur Wilesmith, QX7626, was discharged in November 1943.
62 'Soldiers Getting Good Food In Middle East, But Flies A Problem', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln), 2 November 1942, p. 3.
63 'DESERT PATROL', *The West Australian* (Perth), 5 October 1941, p. 7.
64 'TOBRUK – TOBRUK', *The Corowa Free* Press (NSW), 7 October 1941, p. 4.
65 'BREEZY LETTER', *Lithgow Mercury* (NSW), 9 June 1941, p. 3.
66 'A Desert Song', *The Mercury* (Hobart), 2 December 1942, p. 3.
67 'SOLDIER'S LETTER', *The Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate* (NSW), 2 August 1941, p. 1.
68 G.E. Harriott, 'A.I.F. WAGES WAR ON DESERT FLIES', *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 15 September 1941, p. 6.
69 'DESERT LIFE', *Cairns Post* (Qld), 19 May 1941, p. 3.
70 AWM 52 5/18/3/3 – 2/4 Field Park Company, Royal Australian Engineers, March– May 1941.
71 'NEWS FROM ABROAD', *York Chronicle* (WA), 8 August 1941, p. 3. Joseph Bardi, WX2671, was discharged in November 1945.
72 'SOLDIERS' LETTERS', *The Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate* (NSW), 20 December 1941, p. 8. William Richards, NX21823, was discharged on 12 February 1943.
73 Harrison, *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War*, p. 97.

74 Mitchelhill-Green, *Hitler's War In Africa*, p. 17. Francis Paget, WX5343, born in Wool, England, was discharged in December 1945.
75 'Life in the Desert', *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 9 June 1941, p. 4. Norman McLeod, VX5673, was discharged in June 1951.
76 'A LETTER FROM OVERSEAS', *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* (WA), 24 December 1942, p. 2. William Prideaux, WX6333, was discharged in November 1945.
77 'DESERT SORES', *Truth* (Brisbane, Qld), 26 July 1942, p. 9; 'Kapinnie Soldier's Description of Front Lines in Western Desert of Egypt', West Coast Recorder (Port Lincoln, SA), 28 September 1942, p. 3. Cecil Earl, SX13092, was discharged in March 1946.
78 'Soldiers Tell of Life Abroad', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 18 December 1940, p. 2.
79 'LOCAL LAD IN EGYPT', *The Wiluna Miner* (WA), 17 January 1941, p. 1.
80 'GRANVILLE SOLDIER WOUNDED', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 15 January 1941, p. 2. Edwin 'Blue' Sweeney, NX11116, died on 22 May 1945.
81 'An Aussie Describes Life in the Egyptian Desert', *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 2 January 1941, p. 2. Errol Pattemore, NX4359, was discharged in May 1943.
82 'NEWS FROM WESTERN DESERT', *The Scone Advocate* (NSW), 24 January 1941, p. 3.
83 'LOCAL LAD IN EGYPT', *The Wiluna Miner* (WA), 17 January 1941, p. 1.
84 'Letter From Pte J. Robertson', *Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh* (NSW), 27 February 1941, p. 5. Joseph Robertson, NX23811, was discharged on 29 March 1945.
85 'DIGGERS' LETTERS', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 28 January 1941, p. 3.
86 *Ibid*. Roy Waters, NX1574, was discharged in October 1945.

Chapter 5

1 Corvaja, *Hitler & Mussolini: The Secret Meetings*, p. 149.
2 John Hetherington, 'Vivid Picture of Desert Rout', *The Sun* (Sydney), 20 December 1940, p. 1.
3 'AFTER DESERT BATTLE: ITALIAN PANIC', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 4 January 1941, p. 4.
4 'Desert Scene', *Queensland Times* (Ipswich, Qld), 21 December 1940, p. 10.
5 'A.I.F. Finds Desert Dust as Bad as Bushfire Smoke', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 17 December 1940, p. 3. Norman George Armstrong, VX1378, died from wounds on 16 January 1941.
6 G. E. W. Harriott, 'Mastery Of Digger', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 23 September 1940, p. 4.
7 AWM PR03058.
8 AWM 2020.22.262 PR84/370 Wallet 28 of 90 – Papers relating to the Battle of Bardia, 1941.
9 'Desert Blitzkrieg Over – for the Present', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 24 December 1940, p. 1.
10 'Letter From Bardia', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 28 January 1941, p. 6. Ian Campbell, VX21, was captured on Crete. On 12 April 1945 he escaped from Oflag IX A/H, a POW camp located in Spangenberg Castle. Decorated with Companion of the Distinguished Service Order and Bar, Campbell was discharged from HQ 16th Infantry Brigade.
11 Leo O'Brien, VX40121, was discharged on 13 September 1945.
12 Keith Sinclair Picken, VX48, was discharged on 15 April 1946.
13 Norman Beames, VX12817, was discharged on 28 September 1942.
14 'DUBBO BOYS AMONG FIRST TROOPS IN BARDIA', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 6 February 1941, p. 7. Robert Dawson, NX5410, was discharged on 20 April

1944.

15 Long, *To Benghazi*, pp. 156, 163.

16 'LETTER FROM LIBYA', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 5 March 1941, p. 2. Thomas Mawhinney, NX2332, was discharged on 11 October 1945.

17 'LETTER FROM BARDIA', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 28 January 1941, p. 6.

18 'HYMN BEFORE BATTLE', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 25 January 1941, p. 3.

19 AWM 2020.22.261 PR84/370 Wallet 27 of 90 – Papers relating to the battles of Bardia and Tobruk, 1941

20 'Diggers Sing, Cooee As They Storm Bardia', *The Daily News* (Perth), 6 January 1941, p. 2.

21 'LETTER FROM LIBYA', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 5 March 1941, p. 2.

22 'Attack On Bardia', *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 30 January 1941, p. 4. Courtney Swinton, NX1837, was discharged in June 1943.

23 'AUSTRALIANS SANG IN ATTACKING FORT OF BARDIA', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 13 February 1941, p. 2. Harold Rae, NX5415, was discharged on 31 August 1945.

24 'A RED-HAIRED DAGO', *The Braidwood Review and District Advocate* (NSW), 25 February 1941, p. 3. James Henry Gowen, NX13404, was discharged on 6 September 1945.

25 'LETTER FROM LIBYA', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 5 March 1941, p. 2.

26 'STORY OF EPIC VENTURE', *South Western Times* (Bunbury, WA), 16 April 1941, p. 3. Allan Edwards, NX5467, was killed on 6 November 1942.

27 'BULLET THROUGH MY TROUSERS', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 19 March 1941, p. 3. Raymond Newson, NX11063, was killed in Greece on 27 May 1941.

28 AWM 52 8/3/5 2/5 Infantry Battalion January–March 1941.

29 'The Battle for Bardia', *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder* (NSW), 15 July 1941, p. 1. Thomas McWilliams, NX7136, was discharged as a private in December 1943.

30 'STORIES FROM BARDIA', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW), 7 January 1941, p. 5.

31 '"Quite Enjoyed My Stay In Tobruk"', *The Dandenong Journal* (Vic.), 26 March 1941, p. 3. Ronald Chambers, VX14019, was discharged on 31 August 1945.

32 'ITALIAN NOTEPAPER', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton), 7 March 1941, p. 6. Reginald Parbery, NX1604, was discharged on 12 October 1945.

33 'THOUGHTS UNDER FIRE', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 10 March 1941, p. 4.

34 'Bardia Was "Great Thrill"', *The Daily News* (Perth), 1 March 1941, p. 10. William Nagle, NX3913, from Sydney, was discharged on 28 August 1947.

35 'THE OUTLOOK OF THE DIGGER', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 4 March 1941, p. 2. Alexander Mair, VX69, was discharged on 27 November 1946.

36 'Capture Of Bardia', *North West Champion* (Moree, NSW), 13 February 1941, p. 1. Denis Atkinson, NX13445, was discharged on 19 February 1943.

37 'STORY OF EPIC VENTURE', *South Western Times* (Bunbury, WA), 16 April 1941, p. 3.

38 'LOCAL MAN, BARDIA GOVERNOR', *The Sun* (Sydney), 20 February 1941, p. 3. Promoted to Brigadier, Frederick Chilton, NX231, was discharged on 22 February 1946. Chilton died on 1 October 2007 at the age of 102. A street in Canberra was named in his honour in 2012.

39 'LETTER FROM LIBYA', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 5 March 1941, p. 2.

40 'AUSTRALIANS SANG IN ATTACKING FORT OF BARDIA', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 13 February 1941, p. 2.

41 'Narandera Boys Meet at Tobruk', *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser* (NSW), 21 March 1941, p. 1. John Bynon, NX8968, was discharged in July 1945.

42 Johnston, *At The Front Line*, p.18. Alan Hackshaw, WX2274, was discharged on 11 January 1946.

43 'FIRSTHAND NEWS', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 4 February 1941, p. 1. Gordon Blanchard, NX1593, was discharged in September 1945. James Russell, NX1458, was discharged in January 1946.

44 'BATTLE OF LIBYA', *Manilla Express* (NSW), 18 February 1941, p. 2. Lawrence Ridgewell, NX7916, was discharged on 20 November 1941.

45 'Pte. C. R. SALTMARSH', *Cobram Courier* (Vic.), 18 June 1941, p. 2. Clyden Saltmarsh, VX11957, was discharged on 24 August 1942.

46 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 166.

47 'Remember Bardia?', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 11 January 1944, p. 1.

48 'One Of First To Be Fired On', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 26 March 1941, p. 1. Earl Pickering, NX575, was discharged on 23 August 1945.

49 AWM 52 8/3/7 2/7 Infantry Battalion January 1941.

50 Gavin Long, '45,000 TAKEN AT BARDIA', *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 12 January 1941, p. 2.

51 'A HERO OF BARDIA', *The Age* (Melbourne), 11 January 1941, p. 21; 'The Capture of Bardia', *Delegate Argus* (NSW), 16 January 1941, p. 4. Lawson Wilson, VX3714, was discharged on 5 October 1944.

52 'AUSSIES TALK OF BATTLE IN DESERT "ALL QUIET"', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 11 January 1941, p. 3.

53 'STORY OF EPIC VENTURE', *South Western Times* (Bunbury, WA), 16 April 1941, p. 3.

54 Barter, 'The 2/2nd Australian Infantry Battalion', p. 109.

55 'STORIES FROM BARDIA', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW), 7 January 1941, p. 5; 'Diggers Sing, Cooee As They Storm Bardia', *The Daily News* (Perth), 6 January 1941, p. 2.

56 Stockings, 'The Anzac Legend and the Battle of Bardia', *War In History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January 2010), p. 101.

57 'INTERESTING LETTER', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 8 May 1941, p. 2. Charles Terrey, NX4213, was discharged on 1 November 1945.

58 Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*, p. 170.

59 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 171. Ian Hutchison, NX100, was discharged on 25 March 1946; Peter Tambakis, NX4511, was killed on 3 January 1941; Harold Hergenhan, NX4959, was killed on 3 January 1941; Ian Fulton, NX82, was discharged on 17 May 1945.

60 Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*, p. 170.

61 Edwin Grant, NX4986, was killed on 3 January 1941; Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 172.

62 Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*, p. 171.

63 'LOCAL MILITARY HONOURS', *The St George Call* (Kogarah, NSW), 4 April 1941, p. 3.

64 AWM 52 8/3/2 2/2 Infantry Battalion January 1941. Ray Marney, NX1441, was discharged on 16 October 1945; Roy Tilbury, NX7143, was captured in Greece and held in Stalag XIIIC before his release and eventual discharge on 16 July 1945. George Godbold, NX216, was discharged on 7 February 1945.

65 'GALLANT SOLDIER', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 15 February 1941, p. 5. Born in London on 4 April 1919, Walter John Dawes, NX5409, was killed on 3 January 1941. Hugh Nelson, QX6053, was discharged on 30 June 1942. Arthur Pickett, NX4293, was discharged on 8 March 1944.

66 ‘CAPTURED BY ITALIANS; SAVED BY COMRADES’, *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 18 January 1941, p. 7; ‘BACK FROM BATTLE’, *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 25 April 1941, p. 2. Clarence Reginald Burke, NX4473, was killed on 7 May 1945.

67 John Hetherington, ‘Torrid Half-Hour In AIF Attack’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 10 January 1941, p. 2.

68 AWM 52 8/3/11/7 2/11 Infantry Battalion.

69 ‘The Battle for Bardia’, *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder* (NSW) 15 July 1941, p. 1.

70 ‘“HELL COMING THROUGH BARDIA”’, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* (NSW), 7 February 1941, p. 12. John Webb, NX1270, was discharged on 18 January 1944.

71 Johnston, *The Proud 6th*, p. 37.

72 ‘45,000 TAKEN AT BARDIA’, *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 12 January 1941, p. 2.

73 AWM 52 8/3/2 2/2 Infantry Battalion January 1941.

74 ‘LETTER FROM LIBYA’, *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 5 March, p. 2.

75 ‘Letter From Abroad’, *The Northern Grazier and Miner* (Leonora, WA), 12 April 1941, p. 4. Kenneth Lucas, WX915, born at Seven Kings, England, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his release and eventual discharge on 5 October 1945.

76 ‘AT TOBRUK AND BARDIA’, *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 14 May 1941, p. 2. Ivan Best, NX4472, from Goulburn (NSW) was later wounded at Tobruk and subsequently discharged on 13 April 1942.

77 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 200.

78 ‘HALF THE ITALIANS’ SHELLS WERE DUDS, SAYS S.A. SOLDIER IN LETTER HOME’, *News* (Adelaide), 22 February 1941, p. 3.

79 Stockings ‘The Anzac Legend and the Battle of Bardia’, *War in History*, p. 107.

80 ‘Diggers Sing, Cooee As They Storm Bardia’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 6 January 1941, p. 2.

81 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 200.

82 Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*, p. 173.

83 ‘Bardia Was “Great Thrill”’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 1 March 1941, p. 10.

84 ‘Attack On Bardia’, *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 30 January 1941, p. 4.

85 ‘Wounded Diggers Tell How War’s Show Ended For Them’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 13 April 1941, p. 5. John Gatty, NX8741, was discharged on 8 January 1941;
Robert Stevenson, NX6137, was discharged on 15 August 1941; Robert Lamerton, NX11848, was discharged on 29 September 1941.

86 ‘LETTERS FROM ABROAD’, *Geraldton Guardian and Express* (WA), 20 February 1941, p. 3; ‘ITALIAN TREACHERY IN LIBYAN CAMPAIGN’, *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 14 August 1941, p. 6.

87 ‘Treachery is Answered Well’, *The Daily News* (Perth, WA), 2 May 1941, p. 2. John Fraser, WX471, was killed on 27 May 1941. This post incident may have been either at Bardia or Tobruk, since Fraser’s letter does not refer to a specific location.

88 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 178. David Green, VX170, was killed on 3 January 1941. Charles William Macfarlane, VX5545, was discharged on 14 February 1946.

89 ‘CASUALTIES IN A.I.F.’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 16 January 1941, p. 7.

90 AWM 2020.22.267 PR84/370 Wallet 74 of 90 – Papers relating to the Battle of Bardia, 1940–1947.

91 ‘A.I.F. TAKES 8000 PRISONERS AT BARDIA’, *The Herald* (Melbourne, Vic.), 4 January 1941, p. 1.

92 ‘The Battle for Bardia’, *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder* (NSW) 15 July 1941, p. 1.

93 Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*, pp. 173–174.
94 'ITALIANS IN WILD RETREAT', *Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh* (NSW), 3 April 1941, p. 5. Edgar Weaver, NX3651, was discharged on 3 January 1947.
95 'Remember Bardia?', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 11 January 1944, p. 1.
96 'ATTACK ON BARDIA', *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 27 February 1941, p. 1. Norman Denham, VX5602, was discharged on 10 March 1945.
97 'FIRST HAND NEWS', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 4 February 1941, p. 1. Donald Peirce, NX1603, was discharged from the 2/1st Infantry Battalion on 8 February 1945.
98 'DESERT WARFARE', *The Northern Miner* (Charters Towers, Qld), 15 April 1941, p. 1. Stanley Enks, QX2505, was discharged on 26 November 1942. Patrick Kerby, QX2801, died on 4 January 1941. 'A.I.F. CASUALTY LIST', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld), 27 January, p. 5.
99 'UNOFFICIAL DISPATCHES LETTERS FROM THOSE IN THE FIRING LINE', *Western Mail* (Perth), 15 May 1941, p. 7.
100 'FIRST HAND NEWS', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 4 February 1941, p. 1.
101 Luke McGuinn, NX5413, was discharged in 1961; Brian Patrick Stevens, NX5608, was discharged on 1 September 1945; Vivian Dawson, NX5410, was discharged on 20 April 1944; Bruce Kerdavid, NX5505 was discharged on 27 September 1945. 'DUBBO BOYS AMONG FIRST TROOPS IN BARDIA', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 6 February 1941, p. 7; 'AUSTRALIANS SANG IN ATTACKING FORT OF BARDIA', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 13 February 1941, p. 2.
102 'LIEUT. T. MILLS', *Glen Innes Examiner* (NSW), 20 February 1941, p. 6. Thomas Mills, NX174, was discharged on 26 March 1946.
103 'Dead Boy's Dad Wants To Shake Hands', *Truth* (Brisbane, Qld), 13 July 1941, p. 20. Vincent McQuillan, QX4682, died from wounds on 29 January 1941. McQuillan's citation reads: 'On 5 January 1941 at Bardia, Sgt. McQuillan showed great courage and coolness in an attack on a strong post in the southern defences. He captured 60 prisoners at pistol point and showed great dash and initiative throughout the action.'
104 'BATTLE OF LIBYA', *Manilla Express* (NSW), 18 February 1941, p. 2.
105 '"COME BACK AND SURRENDER"', *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 6 February 1941, p. 4.
106 'SIDELIGHT ON BARDIA', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 21 February 1941, p. 6.
107 'GREAT WIN AT BARDIA', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, NSW), 30 January 1941, p. 3.
108 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 186.
109 AWM PR90/112. Alexander Llewellyn, NX4621, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his discharge on 14 September 1945.
110 See Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac,* p. 186. Max Little, VX182, was discharged on 3 October 1945.
111 'Libyan Hero's Widow Fighting For Pension', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 9 August 1941, p. 3. Henry Gullett, VX3511, was discharged on 22 September 1945. Harold Damm, QX3117, was discharged on 23 January 1944. Frederick Claude Damm, QX3118, was killed on 3 January 1941.
112 See Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*. Arthur Godfrey, VX25, was killed at El Alamein on 4 November 1942.
113 Harold Brockley, VX3497, died on 29 March 1941. Brockley's widow was not entitled to a pension under the Australian Soldiers Repatriation Act because of the circumstances surrounding her husband's death. Repeated appeals lodged on compassionate grounds failed. 'It is pretty tough upon the dependents of a soldier … an unjust rule', cried Brisbane's *Worker*. The Returned Services League (RSL) also intervened, arguing that a soldier caught AWL in the First World War would have been 'confined to barracks' for three days and in this instance the

penalty could not have been harsher. Cabinet ultimately repealed the decision, with Army Minister Percy Spender announcing that considering Brockley's 'very fine record and the unusual circumstances' surrounding his death, that his wife and two children were not to be penalised. 'No Pension for Soldier's Widow', *Worker* (Brisbane), 19 August 1941, p. 12.

114 'A.I.F. TOOK FORTIFIED POSTS AT BARDIA: FACED TERRIFIC ODDS', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 9 January 1941, p. 5.

Chapter 6

1 Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*, p. 275.

2 'NEW YORK ANZACS GIVE £6,250.', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 31 January 1941, p. 7.

3 'SUCCESS OF A.I.F. PRAISED BY MR. CHURCHILL', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 6 January 1941, p. 1. 'Bardia Victory', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga, NSW), 8 January 1941, p. 2; 'THE EGYPTIAN REACTION', *The West Australian* (Perth, WA), 8 January 1941, p. 8.

4 'The War', *The Farmer and Settler* (Sydney), 9 January 1941, p. 2; Stockings, *Bardia*, pp. 276–277; 'HOW BARDIA FELL TO THE AUSTRALIANS', *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (Qld), 8 January 1941, p. 5; Long, *To Benghazi*, p 202.

5 'Italians Fear AIF Bayonets', *The Daily News* (Perth), 28 March 1941, p. 9. John Aubrey O'Malley, WX663, was captured on Crete. He discharged on 31 August 1945.

6 'BARDIA', *The Evening News* (Rockhampton, Qld), 6 January 1941, p. 4.

7 'Melbourne Celebrates Bardia Victory', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld), 7 January 1941, p. 4.

8 'BARDIA VICTORY ACCLAIMED', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 7 January 1941, p. 5.

9 'N.Z. CELEBRATES BARDIA VICTORY', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 8 January 1941, p. 3.

10 'FIRSTHAND NEWS', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 4 February 1941, p. 1.

11 'ITALIAN NOTEPAPER', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 7 March 1941, p. 6. Francis Donnelly, NX1462, was discharged on 1 June 1944.

12 'GREAT WIN AT BARDIA', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 30 January 1941, p. 3.

13 John Hetherington, 'Diggers Sing, Cooee As They Storm Bardia', *The Daily News* (Perth), 6 January 1941, p. 2.

14 'AT TOBRUK AND BARDIA', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 14 May 1941, p. 2.

15 'A.I.F. TOOK FORTIFIED POSTS AT BARDIA: FACED TERRIFIC ODDS', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.) 9 January 1941, p. 5.

16 Stockings, *Bardia: Myth, Reality and the Heirs of Anzac*, pp. 275–276.

17 Gibson, *The Ciano Diaries 1939–1943*, p. 332.

18 'AUSSIES TALK OF BATTLE IN DESERT "ALL QUIET"', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 11 January 1941, p. 3.

19 'Soldier's Letters from Libya', *The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* (Taree, NSW), 12 March 1941, p. 3.

20 'FIRSTHAND NEWS', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 4 February 1941, p. 1. Herbert Leslie McLeod, NX1600; Herbert Charles Barber, NX1451; Samuel Crossley, NX1594; Harold De Looze, NX1595 – all men from 2/2nd Battalion.

21 'Letter from The Front', *The Don Dorrigo Gazette and Guy Fawkes Advocate* (NSW), 21 March 1941, p. 1. George Young, NX1611, was discharged on 4 September 1945.

22 'WESTERN NEWS', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 19 March 1941, p. 3. Robert 'Bob' Meader, NX13585, was killed on 3 January 1941. John

Matthews, NX13214, was discharged on 30 August 1945. William Travers, NX57, was captured on Crete and held in several German camps before his release and eventual discharge on 13 September 1945.

23 'NEWS PICTURES OF DEAD SOLDIER SON', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 1 February 1941, p. 5.

24 'DEATH OF A.I.F. OFFICER', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 13 January 1941, p. 7; 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', *The Sun* (Sydney), 6 April 1941, p. 27. 'WOMEN'S WAR WORK', *The Sun* (Sydney), 26 October 1941, p. 10. Peter Jackson-Taylor, NX12164, was killed on 3 January 1941. Jackson-Taylor's cousin, General Sir Hugh Elles, had personally led British tanks into battle at Cambrai, in 1917.

25 'A Voice from Bardia', *Morwell Advertiser* (Vic.), 30 January 1941, p. 11. Ormond Tulloch, VX709, was killed in Greece on 23 April 1941. Claude Nethercote, VX94, was killed on 3 January 1941.

26 'Pte. C. R. SALTMARSH', *Cobram Courier* (Vic.), 18 June 1941, p. 2.

27 'THE BATTLE OF BARDIA', *The Riverine Herald* (Echuca, Vic.; Moama, NSW), 21 February 1941, p. 3 Allan Kenneth Naismith, VX4838, was discharged on
8 September 1944. Arthur Cooling, VX5327, was discharged on 6 June 1943.

28 'SOLDIER'S LETTER', *Bowen Independent* (Qld), 24 February 1941, p. 4. Joseph Jarret, VX9489, was discharged on 19 September 1944.

29 '"FUNNY CHAPS"', *Nepean Times* (Penrith, NSW), 13 February 1941, p. 1. Harry Bamford, NX4543, was discharged on 24 October 1945.

30 'Wounded, Dandenong Digger Gives Blood For Pal', *The Dandenong Journal* (Vic.), 5 February 1941, p. 15. Albert Leonard Philp, VX5838, was discharged on 31 August 1945.

31 'THE BOYS ABROAD', *Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh* (NSW), 27 February 1941, p. 5. Bryne Bensley, NX5390, was discharged on 29 August 1945.

32 'Pte. Dan Fuller', *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 6 February 1941, p. 3; 'The Boys Went In Singing', *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 17 April 1941, p. 1; 'Uralla's First War Casualty', *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 2 January 1941, p. 1; 'Signaller Cooper', *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 24 April 1941, p. 4. Bert Fuller, NX1808, died on 21 January 1941. Richard Cooper, NX1804, was discharged on 16 July 1941. Buried at Knightsbridge War Cemetery, Acroma, Libya, the personal inscription on Fuller's headstone reads: 'HE FELL AS HE LIVED, EVERYONE'S FRIEND'.

33 AWM 52 8/2/26.

34 'A HERO OF BARDIA', *The Age* (Melbourne), 11 January 1941, p. 21.

35 '"BARBAROUS" AUSTRALIANS', *South Western Times* (Bunbury, WA), 7 February 1941, p. 1. Promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, Patrick Shanahan, WX17, was discharged on 18 September 1966.

36 'LOCAL MAN, BARDIA GOVERNOR', *The Sun* (Sydney), 20 February 1941, p. 3.

37 'Rode through Bardia', *Warialda Standard and Northern Districts' Advertiser* (NSW), 24 February 1941, p. 4; 'BRAIDWOOD SOLDIER', *The Braidwood Dispatch and Mining Journal* (NSW), 14 February 1941, p. 2. George Caling, NX1803, was discharged on 15 June 1945.

38 '2,000 Miles Across The Desert', *The Narrogin Observer* (WA), 3 May 1941, p. 6. Charles Freeman, VX6522, was killed on 21 January 1941.

39 'ITALIANS IN WILD RETREAT', *Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh* (NSW), 3 April 1941, p. 5.

40 'AT TOBRUK AND BARDIA', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 14 May 1941, p. 2.

41 'Demoralisation Of Italians', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 2 April 1941, p. 3. Roy Samuel Sherwood, NX9625, was discharged in May 1945.
42 'A Voice from Bardia', *Morwell Advertiser* (Vic.), 30 January 1941, p. 11.
43 'PTE. ARNOLD WEIR TELLS OF EXPERIENCES IN DESERT AND GREECE', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 21 August 1941, p. 3. Arnold Weir, VX10253, was discharged on 4 October 1945.
44 'PRIVATE NORMAN GEORGE ARMSTRONG', *Williamstown Chronicle* (Vic.), 25 January 1941, p. 1; 'FIVE MORE A.I.F. DEATHS.', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 22 January 1941, p. 11. Armstrong's father had enlisted in World War One when he was 14.
45 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 211.
46 'Rockhampton Boy In Bardia Battle', *The Central Queensland Herald* (Rockhampton, Qld), 13 February 1941, p. 43. John Frederick Hansen, QX2631, was discharged on 14 September 1945.
47 '"I Am Thriving - - - -"', *Johnstone River Advocate and Innisfail News* (Qld), 6 March 1941, p. 2.
48 'One Of First To Be Fired On', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 26 March 1941, p. 1.
49 'Letter From Bardia', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 8 February 1941, p. 6. Edward Le Souef, VX3453, was discharged on 11 September 1945.
50 'FOUGHT AT BARDIA', *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (Leeton, NSW), 4 March 1941, p. 1. Victor Maltman, NX9944, was discharged on 15 March 1943.
51 'Capture Of Bardia', *North West Champion* (Moree, NSW), 13 February 1941, p. 1.
52 'INTERESTING LETTER', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 8 May 1941, p. 2.
53 AWM 2020.22.263 PR84/370 Wallet 30 of 90 – Papers relating to the Battle of Bardia, 1941.
54 'Remember Bardia?', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 11 January 1944, p. 1.
55 'A.I.F. WOUNDED', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 14 April 1941, p. 2.
56 'Albury Soldier Loses An Eye In Fighting At Bardia', *Albury Banner Wodonga Express and Riverina Stock Journal* (NSW), 31 January 1941, p. 24. Ernest Abe, VX7197, was discharged on 3 June 1941.
57 'BATTLE OF LIBYA', *Manilla Express* (NSW), 18 February 1941, p. 2. Invalided home, Gordon Henry Hatch, NX1857, was discharged on 5 December 1941.
58 'POST OFFICE HOTEL', *Manilla Express* (NSW), 23 January 1942, p. 2.
59 'Wounded Diggers Tell How War's Show Ended For Them', *The Sun* (Sydney), 13 April 1941, p. 5; 'MAN'S ANXIOUS TREK TO COEN', Cairns Post (Qld), 3 December 1949, p. 7. John Gatty, NX8741, was discharged on 8 January 1941.
60 'BERT OF BARDIA', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 22 November 1941, p. 16.

Chapter 7

1 'Bardia', *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), p. 2.
2 Gibson, *The Ciano Diaries 1939–1943*, p. 339.
3 'STRANGE PEACE OVER BARDIA BATTLEFIELD', *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 11 January 1941, p. 7.
4 'TOONGABBIE SOLDIER'S LETTER', *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 13 March 1941, p. 2. William Guyatt, VX14539, was discharged on 26 March 1942 with an 'anxiety state'.
5 'TOBRUK'S GUNS BOOM DEFIANCE', *The Sun* (Sydney), 10 January 1941, p. 1.
6 'NIGHT PATROL BY A.I.F. AT TOBRUK', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 16 January 1941, p. 2.

7 'HOW TOBRUK FELL', *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 31 March 1941, p. 4. Geoffrey Hall, NX5127, was discharged on 5 September 1945.

8 AWM 52 8/3/4 2/4 Infantry Battalion January 1941. Paul Tomlinson, NX87, was discharged on 20 November 1945.

9 'LETTER FROM BENGHAZI', *The Inverell Times* (NSW), 24 March 1941, p. 4. Selby Dean, NX2002, was discharged on 29 October 1945.

10 'THE LATE LIEUT. KEMP FIELD', *The Corowa Free Press* (NSW), 21 February 1941, p. 3. William Kemp Field, VX6423, died on 11 January 1941. John Strong, VX6599, was captured in Greece and held in several German camps before his release and eventual discharge on 27 September 1945.

11 'AT TOBRUK AND BARDIA', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 14 May 1941, p. 2; 'Inseparable Soldiers Part At Last', *The Sun* (Sydney), 6 July 1941, p. 5. Victor Lawrence Doyle, NX5030, was discharged on 20 March 1942.

12 'BACK FROM BATTLE', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 25 April 1941, p. 2.

13 'I Am Thriving - - - -', *Johnstone River Advocate and Innisfail News* (Qld), 6 March 1941 , p. 2. Robert McEwan, VX3384, was discharged on 31 August 1945.

14 'A.I.F. Receives Mail While Battle Of Tobruk Raging', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 24 January 1941, p. 1.

15 'Australians Went Into Battle At Tobruk Gorged With Plum Cake and Coffee', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 6 March 1941, p. 4.

16 AWM 52 8/3/1 2/1 Infantry Battalion January–February 1941.

17 Barter, *Far Above Battle: The Experience and Memory of Australian Soldiers in War 1939–1945*, p. 121.

18 'HOW TOBRUK FELL', *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 17 April 1941, p. 9.

19 'DIARY OF A DIGGER OF TOBRUK', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 26 April 1941, p. 15.

20 'Ambulance Driver's Experiences', *Western Mail* (Perth, WA), 5 June 1941, p. 7. Herbert William Eastland, WX3620, was captured in Greece and held in Stalag VIIIB until his release and eventual discharge on 5 April 1944.

21 'A Few Tough Spots', *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 13 March 1941, p. 1. Richard Murray, NX11743, was captured in Greece and held in Stalag XIIIC before his release and eventual discharge on 13 November 1945.

22 'THE FALL OF TOBRUK', *The Independent* (Deniliquin, NSW), 13 March 1941, p. 6.

23 *Smith's Weekly*, 26 April 1941, p. 15.

24 'HOW TOBRUK FELL', *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 17 April 1941, p. 9.

25 'THE FALL OF TOBRUK', *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 24 April 1941, p. 9.

26 'TOBRUK – AND AFTER', *The Gloucester Advocate* (NSW), 21 February 1941, p. 2. Roger Rye, NX1505, was discharged on 16 October 1945.

27 'INTERESTING LETTER', *Lachlander and Condobolin and Western Districts Recorder* (NSW), 8 May 1941, p. 2.

28 'AT TOBRUK', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 3 March 1941, p. 2. Jack Staples, NX1491, was discharged on 3 December 1945.

29 'Soldiers' Letters', *The Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser* (NSW), 1 March 1941, p. 3. Alexander MacDonald, NX13206, was discharged on 31 October 1945.

30 'LETTER FROM WOUNDED SOLDIER', *Cootamundra Herald* (NSW), 12 February 1941, p. 2. Patrick Sullivan, NX13269, was discharged on 9 August 1944. John Delaney, NX13297,

was killed on 21 January 1941.

31 'LETTER FROM WOUNDED SOLDIER', *Cootamundra Herald* (NSW), 12 February 1941, p. 2.

32 '"I COPPED IT AT TOBRUK"', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 12 March, p. 8.

33 'LIBYA FIGHTING', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 19 March 1941, p. 4. William Hill, QX2509, was discharged on 14 January 1943.

34 'RAND PRIVATE TELLS', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 14 February 1941, p. 7. Leopold Douglas Leslie, VX20061, was discharged on 28 October 1941.

35 'Rand Welcomes Soldier Home From the War', *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 1 July 1941, p. 5.

36 'MET IN THE FIGHT FOR TOBRUK', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 19 March 1941, p. 1.

37 'Diggers Installed In Libyan Flat', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 26 March 1941, p. 2. Alan Hutchison, NX6093, was killed on 6 November 1942.

38 'Australians Sang as They Attacked, Says Red Shield Major', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 25 February 1941, p. 3; 'SALVATION ARMY OFFICER CAPTURED', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 31 July 1941, p. 2. Hosier was captured in Greece and sent to a POW camp at Lamsdorf in Silesia until his repatriation back to Australia in November 1944.

39 AWM 52 8/3/4 2/4 Infantry Battalion January 1941. Henry Hamburger, NX5276, was captured in Greece and held in several German POW camps, later discharged on 2 October 1945. Randall Barlow, NX5209, was killed on 21 February 1941.

40 'SOUTHERN NEWS', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 26 March 1941, p. 8. James Henry Nicholas, NX5193, was discharged on 8 October 1945. Theodore Nicholas, NX9469, was discharged from the 102 General Hospital on 1 September 1945.

41 'LETTER FROM LIBYA', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 5 March 1941, p. 2.

42 'THE FALL OF TOBRUK', *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 24 April 1941, p. 9.

43 'Narrogin Boy in Action in Libya', *The Narrogin Observer* (WA), 15 February 1941, p. 5.

44 'Australians Went Into Battle At Tobruk Gorged With Plum Cake and Coffee', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 6 March 1941, p. 4.

45 'BOMBS FELL', *Gilgandra Weekly and Castlereagh* (NSW), 27 February 1941, p. 1.

46 'Ambulance Driver's Experiences', *Western Mail* (Perth), 5 June 1941, p. 7.

47 'AIF Men Sleep In Comfort', *The Daily News* (Perth), 15 March 1941, p. 4. Gordon Ernest Williams, WX1923, was captured and held in Stalag XIIIC before his release and eventual discharge on 3 November 1945.

48 '"TOBRUK HARBOR WAS MASS OF DESTRUCTION"', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 5 March 1941, p. 1. Cuthbert Vincent Gardiner, 14283, was discharged from RAAF 2 Personnel Depot on 2 January 1946.

49 'Narrogin Boy in Action in Libya', *The Narrogin Observer* (WA), 15 February 1941, p. 5.

50 'When Tobruk Surrendered', *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (Leeton, NSW), 6 June, p. 6; 'TOBRUK GOVERNOR WAS CAPTURED BY AUSTRALIAN', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 15 August 1941, p. 3; Walker, *Australia in the War of 1939–45*, p. 231. John Snowden Copland, NX164, was discharged on 10 December 1946. Captured in Greece in April 1941, Snowden was held as a POW in Germany.

51 'Ambulance Driver's Experiences', *Western Mail* (Perth), 5 June 1941, p. 7.
52 'Letter From Abroad', *The Northern Grazier and Miner* (Leonora, WA), 12 April 1941, p. 4.
53 'Letters From the Front', *Camden News* (NSW), 6 March 1941, p. 3. Frederick Woollams, NX13717, was discharged on 21 September 1945.
54 'THE FALL OF TOBRUK', *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 24 April 1941, p. 9.
55 'Death of Wagga Soldier', *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 21 February 1941, p. 3. John Stafford Eldershaw, NX5985, was killed on 22 January 1941.
56 'Macleay Boys Abroad', *The Macleay Chronicle* (Kempsey, NSW), 26 February 1941, p. 4.
57 Gibson, *The Ciano Diaries 1939–1943*, p. 339.
58 'WINNING DOUBLE', *The Age* (Melbourne), 27 January 1941, p. 8.
59 'FALL OF TOBRUK', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 24 January 1941, p. 4
60 'SOUTHERN NEWS', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate (Parramatta*, NSW), 26 March 1941, p. 8.
61 'Capt. Shanahan Writes Home', *South Western Times* (Bunbury, WA), 5 March 1941, p. 3.
62 'MACKAY ON THE TOBRUK VICTORY', *Truth* (Sydney), 26 January 1941, p. 15.
63 'How Gallant Charles Freeman Fell', *Johnstone River Advocate and Innisfail News* (Qld), 4 April 1941, p. 2.
64 'Soldiers' Letters', *The Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser* (NSW), 1 March 1941, p. 3.
65 'BULLET THROUGH MY TROUSERS', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 19 March 1941, p. 3.
66 'BARDIA VICTORY ONLY INCIDENT TO HIS ROSES!', *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 11 February 1941, p. 5.
67 'WELLINGTON NATIVE', *Wellington Times* (NSW), 3 March 1941, p. 3. Ronald Harvey Piper, NX4188, was discharged on 9 October 1945.
68 AWM 52 8/3/2 2/2 Infantry Battalion January 1941.
69 'Macleay Boys Abroad', *The Macleay Chronicle* (Kempsey, NSW), 26 February 1941, p. 4. Ernest Edward Osbourne, NX1542, was discharged on 6 September 1945; John Clyde Barber, NX1520, was discharged on 27 October 1945.
70 'TOBRUK – AND AFTER', *The Gloucester Advocate* (NSW), 21 February 1941, p. 2.
71 'Sale Soldier's Interesting Letter', *Gippsland Times* (Vic.), 7 April 1941, p. 3.
72 'Minnipa Soldier Discovers Boys Aged 15 and 16 Among Italian Prisoners of War', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 16 June 1941, p. 2.
73 'BROTHERS MEET', *Western Star and Roma Advertiser* (Qld), 14 March 1941, p. 5. Roy Lovett, NX2361, was discharged on 24 August 1945.
74 AWM 52 8/3/2 2/2 Infantry Battalion January 1941. 'CPL C. LOVETT KILLED IN ACTION', *Northern Star* (Lismore, NSW), 17 January 1941, p. 6; 'LISMORE SOLDIER RETURNS', *Northern Star* (Lismore, NSW), 31 July 1941, p. 4. Cyril Angus Lovett, NX2360, was killed in action on 3 January 1941. Arthur George Lovett, NX2359, was discharged on 8 March 1946; Thomas George Lovett, N75332, was discharged on 24 November 1942.
75 'Soldiers' Letters', *The Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser* (NSW), 1 March 1941, p. 3.
76 'Tobruk Catholic Church', *Catholic Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 17 April 1941, p. 6.
77 'Narandera Boys Meet at Tobruk', *Narandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser* (NSW), 21 March 1941, p. 1.
78 'COUNTLESS PRISONERS', *The Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser* (NSW), 19 March 1941, p. 6. John Hunter Bishop, NX1801, was discharged from 2/32nd

Battalion as a lieutenant on 20 June 1945.

79 'Demoralisation Of Italians', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 2 April 1941, p. 3.

80 'BATH AND REST', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 3 March 1941, p. 4.

81 'GRANVILLE NEWS', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 26 March 1941, p. 2.

82 'THE ATTACK ON BARDIA', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 22 April 1941, p. 2. Bernard Charles Atherton, NX31326, was discharged on 30 April 1943.

83 'LEFT TOBRUK IN A WRECK', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 9 April 1941, p. 1. Frederick William Elsley, NX5124, was discharged on 8 October 1945.

Chapter 8

1 'Libyan Front', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 8 March, p. 4. Herbert Mavay, NX3643, was discharged on 16 October 1948.

2 'Pte. C. R. SALTMARSH', *Cobram Courier* (Vic.), 18 June 1941, p. 2.

3 'AUSTRALIANS AT DERNA', *The Braidwood Review and District Advocate* (NSW), 25 February 1941, p. 1.

4 'Letter from Libya', *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* (WA), 27 March 1941, p. 1. George Taylor, WX2061, was captured and held in Stalag XVIIIA until his release and later discharge on 6 October 1945.

5 'WA Man Tells Of Patrols', *The Daily News* (Perth), 24 April 1941, p. 5. John Grahame Bedells, WX13, was captured in Greece and held in several German POW camps until released and eventually discharged on 14 November 1945.

6 'LETTERS FROM ABROAD', *Great Southern Herald* (Katanning, WA), 15 March 1941, p. 3. Cecil Rogers, WX712, was captured and held in several German POW camps until his release and eventual discharge on 20 September 1945.

7 'WA Man Tells Of Patrols', *The Daily News* (Perth), 24 April 1941, p. 5; Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 245.

8 'Digger Fights Tanks', *The Daily News* (Perth), 28 March 1941, p. 9. Harold Ernest Morrison, WX496, was captured and held in Stalag VIIIC until his release and eventual discharge on 29 August 1945.

9 AWM 52 8/3/11 2/11 Infantry Battalion. Ralph Honner, WX15, was discharged on 3 January 1945.

10 'SOLDIER'S LETTER', *The Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate* (NSW), 29 March 1941, p. 1. Aubrey Steele, 21451, was discharged on 21 September 1945.

11 AWM 52 8/3/11 2/11 Infantry Battalion.

12 'SOMEBODY BLUNDERED: Letter from Lybia Told of W.A. Soldier's Death Before Army Minister's Telegram', *Sunday Times* (Perth), 6 April 1941, p. 19.

13 *Ibid*. Sydney Douglas Horner, WX498, died on 26 January 1941.

14 AWM 52 8/3/13/23 – 2/13th Infantry Battalion February–March 1941.

15 'Bullet In Head', *The Daily News* (Perth), 24 February 1941, p. 7. NAA B883, WX251. John Gillespie Sneddon, WX251, was discharged on 25 September 1941.

16 'Thanksgiving Day For Tobruk Asked', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 24 January 1941, p. 2.

17 'A DAY AT DERNA', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 3 May 1941, p. 16.

18 Shores et al. *A History of the Mediterranean Air War, 1940–1945*. Vol. 2, p. 251.

19 'Two Gave Life For Comrade', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 9 May 1941, p. 5. Donald Wall, NX13640, was killed on 27 January 1941.

20 'WHEN REG NAPTHALI TOOK COMMAND', *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (Leeton, NSW), 7 November 1941, p. 3. Reginald Thomas Napthali, NX5968, was discharged on 16 November 1945; Hugh Tout, NX5851, was killed on 28 January 1941.

21 'D.S.O. TO COFF'S LAD', *Macleay Argus* (Kempsey, NSW), 30 October 1942, p. 2.

22 'Pte. C. R. SALTMARSH', *Cobram Courier* (Vic.), 18 June 1941, p. 2.

23 'WITH THE LOCAL A.I.F', *Portland Guardian* (Vic.), 24 March 1941, p. 1; 'Letter From Abroad', *The Northern Grazier and Miner* (Leonora, WA), 12 April 1941, p. 4; 'Australian Bayonet Charge Captured Derna's Airport Under Heavy Fire', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 31 January 1941, p. 1; Ian Fitchett, 'THE CAPTURE OF DERNA', *Cloncurry Advocate* (Qld), 14 February 1941, p. 6. McCombe, VX5114, was captured and held in Stalag XIIIC until his release and eventual discharge on 4 December 1945. George Warfe, VX186, was discharged on 28 February 1946.

24 'LETTERS FROM ABROAD', *Great Southern Herald* (Katanning, WA), 15 March 1941, p. 3.

25 'AMERIGO DUMINI', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 7 April 1941, p. 6; 'A.I.F. OFFICER SAYS HE SHOT MATTEOTTI'S KILLER', *South Western Advertiser* (Perth), 10 September 1941, p. 4.

26 'SOLDIER'S LETTER', *The Inverell Times* (NSW), 2 May 1941, p. 3. Laban Wiseman, NX2687, was captured on Crete and held in Stalag XVIIA until his release and eventual discharge on 13 November 1945.

27 'Italian Retreat Described', *The Daily News* (Perth), 17 March 1941, p. 10. Harold John Dyer, WX594, was discharged on 9 November 1945.

28 'Exploits Of Australian Cavalry', *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 14 February 1941, p. 6. Denzil Macarthur-Onslow, NX135, was discharged on 10 April 1946.

29 'HOW A.I.F. TOOK BENGHAZI', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 14 February 1941, p. 4. Lieutenant General Horace Robertson, VX20321, was discharged on 29 October 1954. William Knox, VX337, was discharged on 23 April 1946.

30 'DID NOT BATH FOR A MONTH', *The Daily News* (Perth), 18 March 1941, p. 21. Claude Larking, WX5822, was discharged on 26 September 1945.

31 'DOCTOR'S LAST MINUTES UNDER FIRE', *The Sun* (Sydney), 12 March 1941, p. 6. Archibald Cunningham, NX111, was killed on 15 February 1941.

32 'BATTLE OF THE TANKS', *The Age* (Melbourne), 13 February 1941, p. 7.

33 'Claremont's "Pud" Earle Called "Earl of Derna"', *Mirror* (Perth), 22 March 1941, p. 3. Edward Francis Earle, WX4644, was discharged on 9 August 1945. Captured in Greece, Earle was held mainly in Stalag VIIIB (later Stalag 344).

34 'Letter from Libya', *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* (WA), 27 March 1941, p. 1.

35 'LIBYAN CAMPAIGN', *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* (NSW), 18 April 1941, p. 3.

36 'PRISONERS LIKE FOOTBALL CROWD', *The Daily News* (Perth), 27 March 1941, p. 13. Francis William Telfer, WX3720, was discharged on 1 August 1945.

37 'Letter from The Front', *The Don Dorrigo Gazette and Guy Fawkes Advocate* (NSW), 21 March 1941, p. 1.

38 'Impressions of Libya', *The Southern Sentinel* (Mount Barker, WA), 11 April 1941, p. 1; 'OUR GUM TREES', *Cairns Post* (Qld), 3 October 1941, p. 2. Roger Bramich, WX5823, was discharged on 21 December 1945.

39 'War Nerves', *The Daily News* (Perth, WA) 29 March 1941, p. 5.

40 '"I Wouldn't Have Missed This Show For Worlds"', *The Dandenong Journal* (Vic.), 19 March 1941, p. 11. Robert Samuel Derrick, VX848, was discharged on 10 October 1945.

41 'DIGGER'S RETORT TO MENZIES', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 29 March 1941, p. 12. Phillip Francis Wortham, VX972, was discharged on 4 October 1945.
42 'LOCAL LAD IN EGYPT', *The Wiluna Miner* (WA), 4 April 1941, p. 2.

Chapter 9

1 Davis, 'The Battle of Giarabub – the First Test of the 2nd AIF'.
2 'The Taking of Giarabub', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 8 May 1941, p. 5.
3 'AUSTRALIANS CLOSING IN ON OASIS', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 13 March 1941, p. 7.
4 'FIRST CASUALTY IN ACTION', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 3 January 1941, p. 1. William John Tope, VX5682, was discharged on 18 September 1945.
5 'Lived on birds in Desert Trek', *The Sun* (Sydney), 13 July 1941, p. 15.
6 https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/svssrichardson_paper1.pdf
7 'GIARABUB WAS STERN TEST', *The Advertiser* (Adelaide, SA), 26 March 1941, p. 16.
8 'WITH THE A.I.F.', *The Wagin Argus and Arthur, Dumbleyung, Lake Grace Express* (WA), 1 May 1941, p. 1. Ernest Albert Blight, WX1149, was discharged on 3 September 1945.
9 https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/svssrichardson_paper1.pdf
10 Dickens, *Never Late*, p. 66. Bernard Nash Berry, QX6047, was discharged on 20 July 1945.
11 'Vivid Description', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 26 April 1941, p. 2. James Alexander Mitchell, QX1189, was discharged on 15 June 1943.
12 'Letters from our Boys', *The Australian Women's Weekly* (1933–1982), 7 June, p. 14. Charles Peter Hocking, SX2767, was discharged from Headquarters, 9th Division, on 28 August 1945.
13 'BATTLE OF JARABUB', *Cairns Post* (Qld), 6 May 1941, p. 3. William Franks, QX3824, was discharged on 12 October 1942.
14 'Vivid Description', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 26 April 1941, p. 2.
15 'Desert Battle', *The West Wyalong Advocate* (NSW), 28 April 1941, p.4; 'The Taking of Giarabub', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 8 May 1941, p. 5.
16 'The Taking of Giarabub', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 8 May 1941, p. 5.
17 'WA Man Tells of Fall of Jarabub', *The Daily News* (Perth), 7 May 1941, p. 5. Thomas Vincent, WX1144, was discharged on 4 September 1945.
18 'FIRST SCRAP', *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (Qld), 5 May 1941, p. 4.
19 Dickens, *Never Late*, p. 66. Russell Forster, QX1253, was discharged on 5 May 1945.
20 'Vivid Stories Of Australians' War Experiences', *The Canberra Times* (ACT), 22 November 1958, p. 13. Lance Corporal James Calvert, QX2240, a station hand in northern Queensland, was later wounded in action in July 1941 with a gunshot wound to his left forearm and scalp. Wounded again in December 1942, Calvert was diagnosed with malaria and discharged as medically unfit in December 1943.
21 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 301. William Noyes, QX254, was discharged on 5 July 1946.
22 Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 302.
23 Davis, 'The Battle of Giarabub – the First Test of the 2nd AIF'; 'MACKAY NOTES', *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (Qld), 12 April 1941, p. 7. Robert Reidy, QX6076, was killed on 21 March 1941. William Held, QX7039, was discharged on 18 October 1945.
24 'Vivid Description', *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 26 April 1941, p. 2.
25 'Letters from our Boys', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 7 June, p. 14.
26 https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/svssrichardson_paper1.pdf

27 ‘BATTALION’S EXPERIENCES IN ENGLAND AND MIDDLE EAST’, *The Central Queensland Herald* (Rockhampton, Qld), 22 May 1941, p. 6.
28 AWM 52 2/2/7/11 ‘6th Division Cavalry Regiment War Diary February to March 1941’.
29 ‘The Taking of Giarabub’, *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 8 May 1941, p. 5.
30 ‘WA Man Tells of Fall of Jarabub’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 7 May 1941, p. 5; Long, *To Benghazi*, p. 302.
31 ‘CAPTURE OF JERABUB BY AUSSIES’, *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 21 May 1941, p. 2.
32 Davis ‘The Battle of Giarabub – the First Test of the 2nd AIF’.
33 ‘FIRST SCRAP’, *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (Qld), 5 May 1941, p. 4
34 ‘BATTALION’S EXPERIENCES IN ENGLAND AND MIDDLE EAST’, *The Central Queensland Herald* (Rockhampton, Qld), 22 May 1941, p. 6. James Martin, QX6049, was discharged on 20 December 1945.
35 ‘GIARABUB OURS’, *Chronicle* (Adelaide), 27 March 1941, p. 33.
36 ‘Minnipa Soldier Discovers Boys Aged 15 and 16 Among Italian Prisoners of War’, *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 16 June 1941, p. 2. Charles Buxton, SX493, was discharged on 9 November 1945.
37 ‘Vivid Description’, *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 26 April 1941, p. 2.
38 ‘Capture of Jaghbub’, *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 13 May 1941, p. 2. Gordon McAuliffe, QX1404, was discharged on 23 June 1945.
39 ‘MOTHER’S COMFORT TO MOTHER’, *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 7 May 1941, p. 13. Garth Suthers, QX2164, was discharged on 15 October 1945;
‘CAPTURE OF JERABUB BY AUSSIES’, *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 21 May 1941, p. 2.
40 ‘THE LATE L. C. HANSEN’, *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 24 June 1941, p. 4.
41 AWM ‘6th Division Cavalry Regiment Diary February to March 1941’; ‘WA Man Tells of Fall of Jarabub’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 7 May 1941, p. 5; O’Leary, *To the Green Fields Beyond*, p. 106.
42 ‘HAMMERING THE WOPS’, *The South Eastern Times* (Millicent, SA) 27 June 1941, p. 1. Denzil Henry Arthur Foote, SX452, was discharged on 5 June 1942.
43 ‘DON’T LET YOUR COBBERS DOWN’, *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 1 February 1941, p. 26.
44 Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 87.

Chapter 10

1 ‘Other Soldiers’ Letters’, *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 3 July 1941, p. 3. Grant Marston Thorpe, SX8031, was discharged on 11 March 1945.
2 ‘LETTERS FROM OUR FIGHTING FORCES’, *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 10 March 1941, p. 3. George Millhouse, SX568, was discharged on 9 February 1945.
3 ‘At Tobruk’, *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 18 October 1941, p. 4. Kelvin Croker, QX7529, was the 2/15th battalion’s first casualty on 12 March 1941.
4 Kittel, ‘Capture in the Desert: 3 Anti-Tank Regiment at Mechili 1941 and Alamein 1942’. *Sabretache*, 54(1). Frank Sharp, NX60017, was discharged on 15 July 1946. Keith Sharp, QX10358, was discharged on 7 September 1945. Frederick Eggleston, 252761, was discharged on 22 January 1946.
5 ‘Libyan Experiences’, *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 1 December 1941, p. 3. Vincent Cox, NX27199, was killed on 26 July 1942.

6 ‘Revenge Against Italians’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 2 October 1941, p. 4. John Boyd, NX21077, was discharged on 24 September 1944.
7 ‘SPIRIT OF TOBRUK’, *Queensland Times* (Ipswich, Qld), 18 July 1941, p. 4. Colin Logan, QX8523, was discharged on 25 August 1944.
8 ‘In Tobruk’, *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), 6 June 1941, p. 2. William Angus, QX6243, was discharged on 22 October 1945.
9 ‘PRISONER OF WAR’, *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 15 May 1941, p. 6. Charles Barton, QX6198, was captured and held in Italian and German POW camps before his release and eventual discharge on 3 September 1945. Padre Charles Arkell, QX6284, was discharged on 13 January 1947.
10 Geoffrey Morrison, QX6252, was killed in action on 21 June 1941.
11 ‘TREATMENT OF PRISONERS’, *Daily Mercury* (Mackay, Qld), 7 February 1945, p. 2. Cecil Mitchell, QX8045, was discharged on 3 May 1945.
12 NAA:B883,QX8045; https://www.anzacpow.com/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/371/Swiss_Alphabetical.pdf
13 AWM 2020.22.289, PR89/056, Diary of Maude Elizabeth Edmondson, 1926, c.1941
14 ‘ESCAPE FROM CAMP AT DERNA’, *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld), 26 December 1941, p. 8. Alfred Potter, QX8231, was discharged on 29 November 1945. The Indian troops were most likely elements of the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade that had escaped from Mechili.
15 ‘NEW YEAR HONOURS’, *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (Qld), 1 January 1945, p. 1.
16 ‘THE AUSTRALIANS AT TOBRUK’, *Kapunda Herald* (SA), 13 November 1941, p. 4. Keith McLean, SX7564, was discharged on 15 December 1941.
17 ‘The Wrong Pennant’, *Crookwell Gazette* (NSW), 25 June 1941, p. 1. Arthur Armstrong, NX16003, was discharged on 30 October 1945. James Wallace Hearne, NX16025, was discharged as medically unfit on 25 January 1943.
18 Wilmot, *Tobruk 1941*, p. 99–100. Frank Legg, SX9652, was discharged on 15 December 1943.
19 *Ibid*., p. 87.
20 Schmidt, *With Rommel on the Desert,* p. 37.
21 AWM 52 8/3/28/25 – February–May 1942.
22 McGillivray, *One Man’s War*, pp. 13–14. Frank McGillivray, WX6649, was discharged on 8 October 1945.

Chapter 11

1 Martin & Hardy eds, *Dark and Hurrying Days: Menzies’ 1941 Diary*, p. 110.
2 ‘UNEXPECTED MEETINGS IN WAR ZONE’, *The Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser* (NSW), 10 October 1941, p. 6. Michael Eisdell, NX15775, was discharged on 30 January 1942.
3 Perversi, *Mirror of Time*. Frank Perversi, VX11652, was discharged on 18 December 1945.
4 Flak, *Pages from a Life*. John Flak, NX56319, was discharged on 19 November 1945.
5 ‘A GERMAN’S DIARY’, *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), 10 July 1941, p. 5.
6 AWM 52 8/3/28/25 – February–May 1942.
7 Barber, *The War, the Whores and the Afrika Korps*, pp. 61–63.
8 ‘The Men of Tobruk’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 3 August 1941, p. 4.
9 Reeder, *The Diary of a Rat*, p. 47. Francis Reeder, VX18544, was discharged on 16 September 1948.
10 ‘AUSTRALIAN “BUSH ARTILLERY” A TOBRUK FEATURE’, *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 16 August 1941, p. 5.

11 ‘THE OUTLOOK OF THE DIGGER’, *Border Morning Mail* (Albury, NSW), 3 June 1941, p. 2. John Johnson VX42266, was killed on 17 May 1941.
12 ‘LETTER HOME’, *The Scone Advocate* (NSW), 2 January 1942, p. 2. 13 AWM 52 3/7/43.
14 ‘With The AIF Abroad’, *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), 19 May 1941, p. 2.
15 ‘ANZAC’S EXPLOITS’, *Cairns Post* (Qld), 10 May 1941, p. 5. Leslie Henry Shea, QX4571, was discharged on 17 January 1946.
16 ‘The Wrong Pennant’, *Crookwell Gazette* (NSW), 25 June 1941, p. 1.
17 AWM 54 523/7/16 – [The Siege of Tobruk – Reports].
18 ‘Narrabri Soldiers’, *The North Western Courier* (Narrabri, NSW), 30 June 1941, p. 2. Stanley Gray, NX40642, was discharged on 5 February 1944.
19 ‘A.I.F. ITCHED TO FIGHT’, *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 17 July 1941, p. 1. Malcolm Edward McMahon, NX17019, was discharged on 23 July 1942.
20 ‘Leeton Men Write From Scattered Fronts’, *The Murrumbidgee Irrigator* (Leeton, NSW), 24 June 1941, p. 4. David Alfred Gordon Southgate, NX35289, was discharged on 2 March 1944.
21 AWM 2020.22.252 PR84. Sergeant Ronald Sidney Grant, NX60273, was discharged on 5 September 1945; John ‘Jack’ Edmondson, NX15705, was killed on 14 April 1941.
22 AWM 2020.22.289, PR89/056, Diary of Maude Elizabeth Edmondson, 1926, c.1941.
23 AWM PR89/56, Letter of 14 June 1941 to Mr Edmondson from Lt-Col John Crawford, 2/17th Bn AIF; AWM 2020.22.289, PR89/056, Diary of Maude Elizabeth Edmondson, 1926, c.1941. John Crawford, NX378, was killed on 7 March 1943.
24 ‘DEALT OUT DEATH IN DESERT’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 8 May 1941, p. 5. Henry Brady, NX14388, was killed in action on 14 April 1941.
25 ‘Abroad With The A.I.F.’, *South Western Times* (Bunbury, WA), 25 June 1941, p. 1. Alfred Wilson, WX8389, was killed in action on 10 September 1941.
26 ‘His Life in the Desert’, *Recorder* (Port Pirie, SA), 4 June 1941, p. 2.
27 ‘Written Under Fire’, *The Albany* Advertiser (WA), 30 June 1941, p. 3.
28 ‘Clare Soldier at Tobruk’, *Northern Argus* (Clare, SA), 5 September 1941, p. 4. Harold Davey, SX1007, was discharged on 8 March 1944.
29 AWM 52 8/3/28/25 – February–May 1942. Frederick Heath, WX5514, was discharged on 25 January 1944.
30 *Ibid.*
31 ‘AT TOBRUK’, *Smith’s Weekly* (Sydney), 26 July 1941, p. 16. Morgan Munckton, QX5938, was discharged on 8 October 1945.
32 Barber, *The War, the Whores and the Afrika Korps*, p. 73.
33 ‘Out among the People’, *Chronicle* (Adelaide), 26 June 1941, p. 46.
34 ‘LETTERS FROM ABROAD’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 15 June 1941, p. 10.
35 ‘DIARY OF A GERMAN AT TOBRUK’, *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 24 September 1941, p. 6.
36 Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 128.
37 ‘SPIRIT OF TOBRUK’, *Queensland Times* (Ipswich, Qld), 18 July 1941, p. 4. Colin Logan, QX8523, was discharged on 25 August 1944.
38 ‘WA Man Tells Of Tobruk Battle’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 12 May 1941, p. 4. Thomas Johnson, WX5074 was discharged on 22 December 1944.
39 ‘Father Steele Safe’, *The Catholic Press* (Sydney), 15 May 1941, p. 27.
40 ‘JUNEE SOLDIER’S RETURN’, *Cootamundra Herald* (NSW), 8 September 1941, p. 3.
41 Mackenzie-Smith, *Tobruk’s Easter Battle 1941*, p. 117.
42 ‘BOOK REVIEWS’, *Army* (National), 21 March 1985, p. 6.
43 AWM PR 3DRL 2632. Lecture, Lieutenant General Sir Leslie Morshead, Victoria Barracks, 11 June 1947, pt. 2.

44 ‘German Soldiers Feel Teeth Of “Rats Of Tobruk”’, *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 28 August 1941, p. 4.
45 AWM 54 523/7/19. A brief history of Tobruk: March–August 1941.
46 Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 52.
47 ‘Soldier’s Letter’, *Cloncurry Advocate* (Qld), 5 September 1941, p. 4. George Donald Keyes, QX2409, was discharged on 8 January 1945
48 ‘WITH THE A.I.F ABROAD’, *The Dalby Herald* (Qld), 18 July 1941, p. 4. Archie Campbell, QX5791, was killed on 4 November 1944.
49 ‘SOLDIERS’ LETTERS. ACTION AT TOBRUK’, *West Coast Sentinel* (Streaky Bay, SA), 1 August 1941 p. 2. Eric Foggo, SX6533, was discharged on 4 December 1945.
50 ‘TOBRUK IS ROMANCE TO BRISBANE GIRL’, *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 7 September 1941, p. 5. Harold Salisbury, QX4387, was killed in New Guinea on 4 September 1942.
51 ‘Action at Tobruk’, *The Kiama Reporter and Illawarra Journal* (NSW), 5 November 1941, p. 1. Noel Smith, NX14999, was killed on 9 June 1945.
52 ‘Pte. Boxer Tells of Last Fight at Tobruk’, *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 7 July 1941, p. 2. Edward Boxer, SX7528, was discharged on 18 September 1941; Harold Parker, SX7572, was discharged on 25 September 1945; Desmond Taylor, SX7911, was discharged on 14 October 1944.
53 ‘Wounded In Africa’, *Border Watch* (Mount Gambier, SA), 3 June 1941, p. 1. Maurice Jones, SX3158, was discharged on 18 January 1943.
54 ‘“Laughing Death” Appeal From Tobruk’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 13 September 1941, p. 3. Alfred Allard, SX730, was discharged on 28 December 1944.
55 ‘Dug in With Bare Hands’, *News* (Adelaide), 25 August 1941, p. 3. Charles Daly, SX254, was discharged on 22 June 1942.
56 Rees, *Desert Boys*, p. 566. Leslie Watkins, NX23179, was discharged on 11 August 1945.
57 Johnston, *At the Frontline*, p. 42.
58 Austin, *Journey to Tobruk*, p. 138.
59 ‘TOBRUK A DANGER TO NAZIS’, *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 25 April 1941, p. 2.
60 Halder et al., *The Halder War Diary 1939–1942*, p. 374.
61 McGillivray, *One Man’s War*, p. 18.
62 ‘“EIGHT HOURS OF HELL”’, *Ouyen Mail* (Vic.), 30 July 1941, p. 7. Lindsay Bailey, VX33882, was discharged on 8 January 1945.
63 ‘Fighting at Tobruk’, *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA), 17 May 1941, p. 9.
64 Ian Fitchett, ‘TOBRUK OBSTACLE TO AXIS DRIVE ON SUEZ’, *The Central Queensland Herald* (Rockhampton, Qld.), 22 May 1941, p. 14.
65 ‘Fighting at Tobruk’, *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA), 17 May 1941, p. 9.
66 ‘Some Memories Of Tobruk Siege’, *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate* (NSW), 19 April 1949, p. 4.
67 ‘FRENCHMAN’S TRIBUTE TO A.I.F. IN “VERDUN OF DESERT”’, *News* (Adelaide), 26 August 1941, p. 2.
68 AWM 52 8/3/35/10 – May 1941.
69 ‘Blitz Tactics Beaten At Tobruk’, *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane, Qld), 15 May 1941, p. 1.
70 Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 132.
71 ‘LETTER FROM LIBYA’, *The Inverell Times* (NSW), 16 July 1941, p. 6. Richard Makim, NX19093, was discharged on 1 November 1945.
72 *Ibid*.
73 ‘TOBRUK HAS NO WHITE FLAG’, *News* (Adelaide), 30 August 1941, p. 3; ‘In Tobruk’, *The Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser* (NSW), 6 September 1941, p. 3. Robert

McGhee, SX7038, was discharged on 30 September 1944.

74 Devine, *The Rats of Tobruk*, p. 72.

75 'FROM TOBRUK', *Goulburn Evening Post* (NSW), 22 August 1941, p. 7. William Herbert Heath, NX59311, was discharged on 12 October 1945.

76 'ADVICE TO GOEBBELS', *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), 31 July, p. 6.

77 AWM 52 5/18/3/4 – 2/4 Australian Field Park Company, Royal Australian Engineers, June–August 1941.

78 'ON LEAVE IN EGYPT', *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 6 October 1941, p. 8.

79 Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's War Directives 1939–1945,* pp. 131–132.

Chapter 12

1 'IN TOWN AND OUT', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 16 July 1941, p. 6; Norman Speirs, VX11415, was discharged on 14 August 1946.

2 'TOUGH TOBRUK', *The Daily News* (Perth), 1 October 1941, p. 8. Harry Brown, WX5738, was discharged on 1 July 1944.

3 Johnston, *At the Front Line: Experiences of Australian Soldiers in World War II*, p. 43. John Butler, VX40829, was discharged on 13 September 1945.

4 'FRONT LINE LUNCHEON', *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 17 September 1941, p. 1.

5 'A "QUIET" DAY ON THE TOBRUK FRONT', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 16 July 1941, p. 5. Gordon Davison, NX31057, was killed on 30 July 1942.

6 'TAKEN AT TOBRUK', *The West Australian* (Perth), 16 July 1941, p. 4.

7 'Letter from Overseas', *Manjimup and Warren Times* (WA), 1 July 1942, p. 5.

8 'LIFE AT TOBRUK', *Molong Express and Western District Advertiser* (NSW), 9 August 1941, p. 5.

9 *Ibid.*; '"DIGGER" SPIRIT ON TOP', *The Muswellbrook Chronicle* (NSW), 5 September, p. 6. Raymond Cole, NX13265, was discharged on 9 June 1942.

10 'THE "RATS" OF TOBRUK', *Melton Express* (Vic.), 6 September 1941, p. 1.

11 '"In the Thick of It" in Egypt', *Border Chronicle* (Bordertown, SA), 9 October 1942, p. 4. Nicol McLellan, SX7054, was discharged on 10 October 1945.

12 'Clare Diggers Tell Many Tales of Tobruk', *Northern Argus* (Clare, SA), 3 April 1942, p. 5; 'Nazi Propaganda Goes Astray', *News* (Adelaide), 2 March, p. 4; 'TOBRUK RAT HAS MEDAL HE "COULDN'T WEAR"', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 12 April 1941, p. 9; 'Tobruk Rat Medal', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld), 3 January 1942, p. 5; 'THE TOBRUK MEDAL', *Macleay Argus* (Kempsey, NSW), 10 March 1942, p. 4; '"RAT" MEDAL IS PRIDE OF TOBRUK', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 2 January 1942, p. 3. Leonard Barlow, NX59151, was discharged on 19 July 1944. Arnold Brown, NX393, was discharged on 29 August 1946.

13 Devine, *The Rats of Tobruk*, p. 57.

14 'SNAKES AS WELL AS BOMBS, SHELLS AND BULLETS IN TOBRUK', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 7 June 1941, p. 3 James Mulcahy, VX48676, was discharged on 14 May 1945. Richard Fancke, VX40949, was discharged on 2 August 1945.

15 Fletcher, *NX 20365*, p. 32. Andrew Fletcher, NX23965, was discharged on 14 November 1945.

16 'Trophies From the Middle East', *Singleton Argus* (NSW), 9 February 1942, p. 3; AWM 52 8/3/13/32 – December 1941. Ronald Kleist, NX13933, was discharged on 10 August 1945.

17 'A LETTER FROM TOBRUK', *The Albany Advertiser* (WA), 27 October 1941, p. 2. James Stephen, VX19474, was discharged on 26 November 1945.

18 'Written Under Fire', *The Albany* Advertiser (WA), 30 June 1941, p. 3.

19 ‘JUNEE SOLDIER’S RETURN’, *Cootamundra Herald* (NSW), 8 September 1941, p. 3.
20 ‘Letters From Overseas’, *Great Southern Herald* (Katanning, WA), 11 October 1941, p. 3. Arthur Ramsden, WX9904, was killed on 2 November 1942.
21 ‘Personal Reminiscences’, *Recorder* (Port Pirie, SA), 28 July 1941, p. 3. Max McCormack, SX10214, was discharged on 19 December 1945.
22 ‘Lives In Dugout At Tobruk’, *The Daily News* (Perth), 24 September 1941, p. 20. William Marchant, WX4947, was discharged on 1 October 1944.
23 ‘THOUGHT GERMAN BOMBER WAS GOING TO FALL ON HIM’, *The Beaudesert Times* (Qld), 3 October 1941, p. 4. Reginald Dun, QX14866, was discharged on 5 September 1945.
24 ‘LIFE AT TOBRUK’, *Ouyen Mail* (Vic.), 10 September 1941, p. 2.
25 AWM 54 523/7/16 – [The Siege of Tobruk – Reports]. David Benjamin, NX12267, was discharged on 29 November 1945.
26 National Archives, WO 201/353.
27 Converse, *Armies of Empire*, p. 87.
28 ‘“Bomb-Happy” Digger’, The *Daily News* (Perth), 29 August 1941, p. 14. James Larner, WX379, was discharged on 29 November 1941.
29 ‘NIGGARDLY PENSION’, *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 15 November 1941, p. 2. James Parker, NX33650, was discharged on 13 October 1941.
30 ‘Mystery Death After Dance’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 11 October 1943, p. 2; ‘CORONER DECIDES MAN’S DEATH WAS HASTENED BY WAR’, *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate* (NSW), 4 November 1943, p. 5.
31 ‘WAR SHOCK CASES’, *The Age* (Melbourne), 5 July 1941, p. 12.
32 ‘JUNEE SOLDIER’S RETURN’, *Cootamundra Herald* (NSW), 8 September 1941, p. 3.
33 Johnston, *At the Front Line*, p. 24.
34 ‘Clare Soldier at Tobruk’, *Northern Argus* (Clare, SA), 5 September 1941, p. 4.
35 Johnston, *At the Front Line*, p. 32.
36 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
37 ‘A LETTER FROM TOBRUK’, *Mount Barker and Denmark Record* (Albany, WA), 27 October 1941, p. 2.
38 ‘With the 2nd A.I.F Abroad’, *The Riverine Herald* (Echuca, Vic.), 17 November 1941, p. 1. Charles Robertson, VX37294, was discharged on 25 September 1946.
39 ‘NOTES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST’, *The Propeller* (Hurstville, NSW), 21 August 1941, p. 8. Cyril Welch, NX22383, was discharged ‘medically unfit for service’ on 27 Jan 1942.
40 ‘Other Soldiers’ Letters’, *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 3 July 1941, p. 3.
41 ‘Soldier’s Letter’, *Huon and Derwent Times* (Tas.), 24 July 1941, p. 3. Douglas Stubbs, TX636, was discharged on 13 April 1945.
42 ‘He Meets All Sick Diggers’, News (Adelaide), 14 February 1942, p. 5. Essington Day, S213432, was discharged on 20 August 1942.
43 ‘UNEXPECTED MEETINGS IN WAR ZONE’, *The Armidale Express and New England General Advertiser* (NSW), 10 October 1941, p. 6.
44 ‘TOBRUK SCENE’, *Kyabram Free Press and Rodney and Deakin Shire Advocate* (Vic.), 5 May 1942, p. 1. William Officer, VX35853, was discharged on 13 June 1944.
45 ‘Life in Tobruk’, *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 18 September 1941, p. 3.
46 ‘THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK’, *The Propeller* (Hurstville, NSW), 26 June 1941, p. 2. William Donaldson, NX28120, was discharged on 16 October 1945.
47 ‘Bringing Down a Dive Bomber’, *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 12 June 1941, p. 4. Douglas Dumbar Balfour-Ogilvy, SX1219, was discharged on 18 May

1945.

48 'An Interesting Letter From Harley Lang', *The Times and Northern Advertiser* (Peterborough, SA), 1 August 1941, p. 4; AWM 52 8/3/35/10 – May 1941.

49 'Soldier is Asked To Quit House', *The Sun* (Sydney), 22 August 1941, p. 3; 'ONE-HANDED, BUILDS HOME', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 20 September, p. 5; Harry Williams, NX18734, was discharged on 22 December 1941.

50 'Huns A Rotten Lot', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 20 August 1941, p. 3; 'WOUNDED THIRD TIME', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 10 November 1943, p. 2. Donald Perkins, NX20988, was discharged on 15 September 1945.

51 'SOLDIER'S LETTER', *Bowen Independent* (Qld), 5 September 1941, p. 4. William Harrison, QX1703, was discharged on 15 February 1946.

52 'Three men tell of perilous adventures', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 20 June 1942, p. 14. George Power, NX36387, was discharged on 25 July 1945.

53 'Letter from Tobruk', *The Herald* (Melbourne), 30 August 1941, p. 14.

54 'Reprisal Campaign Italy Charges Atrocities By Australians', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 12 October 1942, p. 5; 'MENZIES ON MEN OF TOBRUK', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 20 August 1941, p. 3.

55 Mackenzie-Smith, *Tobruk's Easter Battle 1941: The Forgotten Fifteenth's Date with Rommel's Champion*, p. 116.

56 AWM 523/7/43 Thomas Gard, QX6436, was discharged on 6 December 1945; Walter Tuit, SX8293, was discharged on 1 February 1944.

57 'PRIEST'S HEROISM AT TOBRUK', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 6 September 1941, p. 1. Reginald Wheeler, WX3384, was discharged on 22 November 1944.

58 'Salute To Chaplain Gard', *Catholic Weekly* (Sydney), 18 January 1941, p. 20; 'PRIEST HERO OF TOBRUK', *Catholic Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 18 September 1941, p. 17; 'LETTERS to the EDITOR', *News* (Adelaide), 3 May 1951, p. 15.

59 'Strange Armistice In Tobruk Desert', *The Picton Post* (NSW), 22 October 1941, p. 4. Victor Lane, NX22530, was killed near Lae on 29 October 1943.

60 'Trigger Valley Truce: A Tobruk Memory', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 31 July 1948, p. 16.

61 'In The Desert', *Coffs Harbour Advocate* (NSW), 26 August 1941, p. 1. Allan Richards, NX15814, was discharged on 18 May 1945.

62 'Strange Armistice In Tobruk Desert', *The Picton Post* (NSW), 22 October 1941, p. 4. Victor Lane, NX22530, was killed in action on 29 October 1943 in New Guinea.

63 'The Men of Tobruk', *The Sun* (Sydney), 3 August 1941, p. 4.

64 'EPIC DEFENCE OF TOBRUK', *The Age* (Melbourne), 9 September 1941, p. 7.

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1 'THE AUSTRALIANS AT TOBRUK', *Kapunda Herald* (SA), 13 November 1941, p. 4.

2 Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p. 412.

3 'WITH THE A.I.F ABROAD', *The Dalby Herald* (Qld), 18 July 1941, p. 4.

4 AWM 52 8/3/13/25 – June–July 1941.

5 AWM 52 8/3/28/25 – February–May 1942.

6 'FAREWELL TO TOBRUK', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 20 June 1942, p. 12. Alan Lowry, QX14639, was discharged on 10 January 1945.

7 'NORTHERN SERGEANT TELLS HOW AUSSIES LEFT TOBRUK', *The Evening Advocate* (Innisfail, Qld), 7 January 1942, p. 4. Alan Baldwin, QX3698, was discharged from 6 Division

in September 1945.

8 'LETTER FROM MIDDLE EAST', *Warialda Standard and Northern Districts' Advertiser* (NSW), 28 July 1941, p. 2. Lorenzo Halloran, QX1324, was killed on 22 September 1943.

9 'TOBRUK – "HELL'S KITCHEN"', *Jerilderie Herald and Urana Advertiser* (NSW), 30 October 1941, p. 3. Alfred Tongs, VX26894, was discharged on 1 November 1946.

10 'With the Boys Abroad', *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser* (NSW), 13 February 1942, p. 6. Aubrey Clarke, NX21443, was discharged on 6 February 1945.

11 Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 421. Matthew Kirby, NX27498, was discharged on 14 September 1945.

12 AWM 54 523/7/16 – [The Siege of Tobruk – Reports]. Richard Oates, VX16434, was discharged on 4 January 1944. Frederick Burrows, NX383, was discharged on 28 July 1945.

13 'He Played The Bagpipes As He Lay Dying', *Smith's Weekly* (Sydney), 30 October 1948, p. 20.

14 'TEARS FOR TOBRUK DAY', *The Sun* (Sydney), 19 November 1941, p. 3.

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1 'With the Boys Abroad', *The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser* (NSW), 13 February 1942, p. 6.

2 'CHRISTMAS – 1941', *Cloncurry Advocate* (Qld), 19 December 1941, p. 3

3 'Tobruk Rats' In Lebanon', *The Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 1 June 1942, p. 3.

4 Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, pp. 519–522.

5 'Troops In Syria Looking', *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, NSW), 18 November 1941, p. 4. Kenneth May, SX7106, was discharged on 16 November 1945.

6 'Anzac in Syria', *The Mount Magnet Leader and Youanmi Miner* (WA), 10 April 1942, p. 4. Malcolm McLeod, WX2484, was discharged on 15 October 1945.

7 AWM 52 8/3/13/32 – December 1941.

8 'LETTERS FROM OUR BOYS', *The Australian Women's Weekly,* 21 February, p. 2; 'Soldier's Letter', *Pinnaroo and Border Times* (SA), 13 August 1942, p. 2. William Hall, QX17985, was killed on 9 November 1942. Thomas Trish, SX6894, was discharged on 5 April 1946.

9 'Local Soldier Writes of Egypt', *Williamstown Chronicle* (Vic.), 2 April 1942, p. 1. Horace Hocking, VX43605, was discharged on 28 September 1945.

10 'SYRIA BETTER THAN PALESTINE', *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers' Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 29 April 1942, p. 2. Thomas Stanley, NX14588, was discharged on 27 September 1944. 'PTE. DOUG. MICKAN WRITES HOME', *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, SA), 29 January 1942, p. 3. Douglas Mickan, SX6229, was discharged on 7 January 1946.

11 'MAYBE NEXT CHRISTMAS', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 3 January 1942, p. 9. David McNicoll, NX52009, was discharged on 25 April 1944.

12 'A LETTER FROM OVERSEAS', *Corrigin Chronicle and Kunjin-Bullaring Representative* (WA), 12 March 1942, p. 1. Robert McGuire, WX14234, was discharged on 27 October 1945.

13 'An Australian Digger in India, Egypt, Syria, Trans Jordan, Libya, Palestine and the Lebanon', *Northern Argus* (Clare, SA), 28 August 1942, p. 4. George Allison, NX45253, was discharged on 9 October 1945.

14 Westphal, *The German Army in the West,* p. 112.

15 'ENEMY THRUST IN LIBYA', *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 31 January 1942, p. 6.

16 Moorehead, *African Trilogy*, p. 346.

17 ‘LONGING TO AVENGE LOSS OF TOBRUK’, *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers’ Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 19 August 1942, p. 5.
18 Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein*, p. 537.
19 ‘Tobruk’, *The Uralla Times* (NSW), 25 June 1942, p. 1.
20 Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, p. 383.
21 ‘Alamein Battlefield’, *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA), 11 July 1942, p. 5
22 ‘DEFENCE OF ALEXANDRIA’, *The West Australian* (Perth), 2 July 1942, p. 2.
23 ‘SOUVENIRED SIGN NOW IN MIDDLE EAST’, *Barrier Mine*r (Broken Hill), 24 August 1942, p. 1.
24 ‘A LETTER FROM OVERSEAS.’, *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* (WA), 24 December 1942, p. 2.
25 AWM 2022.6.144, PR82/190, Wallet 2 of 3 – Black and white photocopy of diaries relating to the Second World War service of SX7964 Lieutenant Thomas Currie Derrick, 2/48 Battalion. Thomas Derrick, SX7964, died on 24 May 1945.
26 ‘How The Diggers Returned To The Desert’, *The Argus* (Melbourne), 26 December 1942, p. 6. Alexander Renton, VX27115, was discharged 3 July 1944.
27 AWM 54 526/6/12 – [Operations in the Alamein Position – Reports:] Headquarters 9 Aust Division, Operations Alamein, July 1942; and 24 Infantry Brigade report on operations, October 1942.
28 ‘Alamein’, *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, NSW), 7 November 1942, p. 7
29 Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 261.
30 Scoullar, *The Battle for Egypt*, p.155.
31 Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 249.
32 ‘Letters The Forces Write’, *The Argus* (Melbourne), 14 November 1942, p. 6. Ian Fullerton, VX15177, was discharged on 19 December 1945.
33 ‘“Jerry” Defeated at Alamein’, *Border Watch* (Mount Gambier, SA), 23 February 1943, p. 5. Keith Worthley, SX3868, was discharged on 25 September 1945.
34 ‘A LETTER FROM OVERSEAS’, *Pingelly-Brookton Leader* (WA), 24 December 1942, p. 2.
35 *Ibid*.
36 ‘“Diver” Derrick a Modest Hero’, *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 30 November 1943, p. 2.
37 ‘CHIEFLY PERSONAL’, *The Tumut and Adelong Times* (NSW), 22 September 1942, p. 2. Douglas Naughton, NX15829, was killed on 11 July 1942; Richard Riddell, NX15838, was killed on 6 December 1943.
38 AWM 54 526/6/12.
39 ‘JIMMY NICOLL’S MEMOIRS’, *Live Wire* (Yallourn, Vic.), 28 July 1943, p. 2. James Nicoll, VX48692, was discharged on 20 May 1944.
40 ‘12 YEARS AGO AT EL ALAMEIN’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 21 October 1954, p. 33.
41 ‘EXPLOITS IN THE DESERT’, *The Age* (Melbourne), 24 August 1942, p. 3.
42 *Ibid.*; ‘DECORATIONS FOR A.I.F. BRAVERY’, *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 14 September 1942, p. 2. Victor Knight, NX16912, was discharged on 21 August 1947.
43 ‘DISTRICT SOLDIER TELLS OF DESERT FIGHTING’, *The Bacchus Marsh Express* (Vic.), 26 September 1942, p. 1. Alan Coe, VX23961, was discharged on 20 November 1945.
44 ‘12 YEARS AGO AT EL ALAMEIN’, *The Sun* (Sydney), 21 October 1954, p. 33.
45 ‘“Interesting” Letter from Middle East’, *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder* (NSW), 8 January 1943, p. 3. William Dixon, NX29040, was discharged on 20 October 1945.
46 ‘SOLDIER WRITES HOME’, *Kyabram Free Press and Rodney and Deakin Shire Advocate* (Vic.), 6 November 1942, p. 5. Eric Billingham, VX56691, was discharged on 2 March 1945.
47 ‘Kapinnie Soldier’s Description of Front Lines in Western Desert of Egypt’, *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 28 September 1942, p. 3.

48 'Sidelights on Life in African Desert', *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 29 December 1942, p. 2. Ronald Wilson Pitt, TX2608, was discharged on 23 November 1945.
49 Kenneth Slessor, 'CONTINUED CALM IN AUSTRALIAN SECTOR ON ALAMEIN FRONT', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld), 28 July 1942, p. 4.
50 'Tumby Bay Soldier's Scare When Huge Bomb Lands 20 Feet Away In Western Desert', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 23 November 1942, p. 3. Jos Jas Rowe Trezise, NX10812, was discharged on 30 November 1945.
51 'SOLDIER'S LETTER', *The Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate* (NSW), 10 October 1942, p. 6; 'How A.I.F. routed Rommel', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 20 March 1943, p. 14. Trevor Westerman, VX15450, was discharged on 1 May 1946.
52 'Sidelights on Life in African Desert', *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 29 December 1942, p. 2; 'Kapinnie Soldier's Description of Front Lines in Western Desert of Egypt', *West Coast Recorder* (Port Lincoln, SA), 28 September 1942, p. 3. Ronald Pitt, TX2608, was discharged on 23 November 1945.
53 'BACK FROM DESERT', *The Age* (Melbourne), 8 January 1943, p. 2. Donald McPherson, QX6676, was discharged on 24 October 1945.
54 'Christmas Shopping In The Front Line', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 2 January 1943, p. 10. James Sherry, NX50449, was discharged on 31 July 1945.
55 'THE LAND OF LOTS O' TIME AND A FEW DOG-FIGHTS', *Macleay Argus* (Kempsey, NSW), 3 November 1942, p. 3. Leo Cheers, NX37736, was discharged on 25 October 1944.
56 'DEATH OF A TUMUT SOLDIER', *The Tumut and Adelong Times* (NSW), 27 July 1943, p. 2. Henry Cribb, NX38215, was killed on 17 July 1942. Arthur Rees, NX71606, was discharged on 14 July 1947.
57 AWM 52 4/11/3/4 – [Unit War Diaries, 1939–45 War] 4 Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, July 1942.
58 'With the Ninth at El Alamein', *The Beaudesert Times* (Qld), 17 March 1944, p. 3.
59 'Letters The Forces Write', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 14 November 1942, p. 6. Charles Patrick Browne, VX37041, was killed in action on 10 July 1942.
60 'Slight Allied Advance On South End Of Desert Line', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld) 22 July 1942, p. 4. Heathcote Hammer, VX24325, was discharged on 28 November 1945.
61 'Slight Allied Advance On South End Of Desert Line', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld) 22 July 1942, p. 4.
62 'THE DIGGERS LIKE PADRE ARCHBOLD', *Glen Innes Examiner* (NSW), 7 November 1942, p. 2. Berkeley Archbold, NX70328, was discharged on 2 April 1947.
63 AWM 54 526/6/12.
64 'Rommel Squeezed By Aussies', *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, NSW), 22 July 1942, p. 1.
65 'DISTRICT SOLDIER TELLS OF DESERT FIGHTING', *The Bacchus Marsh Express* (Vic.), 26 September 1942, p. 1.
66 'Private Gurney, V.C., won honor in his first action', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 26 September 1942, p. 29.
67 Brune, 'Gurney, Arthur Stanley (1908–1942)', https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gurney-arthur-stanley-10381
68 'Noted City Cyclist Wins Victoria Cross', *Mirror* (Perth), 12 September 1942, p. 4.
69 'PTE GURNEY, VC', *The West Australian* (Perth), 14 September 1942, p. 4; 'V.C. WINNER', *Daily Examiner* (Grafton, NSW), 13 January 1943, p. 2.
70 'ABORIGINAL BACK FROM ALAMEIN', *The Daily News* (Perth), 2 October 1942, p. 5.
71 '"In the Thick of It" in Egypt', *Border Chronicle* (Bordertown, SA), 9 October 1942, p. 4.

72 Townsend, 'Road to Ruin: The 9th Australian Division and the First Battle of El Alamein', p. 17.
73 'Lull In Desert Fighting', *Queensland Times* (Ipswich, Qld), 22 July 1942, p. 3.
74 'ABORIGINAL BACK FROM ALAMEIN', *The Daily News* (Perth), 2 October 1942, p. 5; 'SOLDIER'S RESOURCE', *Guinea Gold* (Papua New Guinea), 15 November 1943, p. 2. Colin Murn, SX11214, was discharged on 25 July 1943.
75 'El Alamein Looks At The Home Front', *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 13 February 1943, p. 4.
76 Boog et al. ed., *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. 6, p. 741.

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1 'Desert Home Sweet Home', *The Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 14 October 1942, p. 6.
2 'QUIET IN EGYPT', *The West Australian* (Perth), 1 August 1942, p. 5.
3 'Churchill Reviewed Alamein AIF', *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (Qld), 20 August,1942, p. 1. Johnston, *Anzacs in the Middle East*, p. 177; Johnston, *That Magnificent 9th*, p. 97. Stanley Collins, SX13319, was discharged on 24 September 1946.
4 Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, p. 6.
5 Moorehead, *Montgomery: A Biography*, p. 122.
6 'How Montgomery Smashed Rommel', *Saturday Evening Post* (USA), 5 December 1942, p. 95.
7 'General Gets Digger Hat', *News* (Adelaide), 20 August 1942, p. 1.
8 Goodhart, *The History of the 2/7th Australian Field Regiment*, Vol. 2, p. 190.
9 Latimer, *Alamein*, p. 99.
10 Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 275.
11 'ALLIED SUCCESS IN EGYPT GREATER THAN FIRST THOUGHT', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 8 September 1942, p. 1; Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 283.
12 Detwiler ed., *World War II German Military Studies,* Vol. 14, Part VI*, The Mediterranean Theatre,* p. 68.
13 'ALLIED SUCCESS IN EGYPT GREATER THAN FIRST THOUGHT', *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 8 September 1942, p. 1.
14 'SOLDIER WRITES HOME', *Kyabram Free Press and Rodney and Deakin Shire Advocate* (Vic.), 13 November 1942, p. 7. Arthur Gregson, VX16414, was discharged on 3 October 1943.
15 AWM 52 8/3/28/28 – September–October 1942. George Barnes, WX8189, was discharged on 28 September 1944.
16 Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 173
17 AWM 52 8/3/24/26 – November–December 1942.
18 'SOLDIER'S CLOSE BRUSH WITH DEATH', *Record* (Emerald Hill, Vic.) 16 January 1943, p. 1; AWM 52 4/11/3/8 – [Unit War Diaries, 1939–45 War] 4 Australian Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, October 1942. Harold Telford, VX22112, was discharged on 17 October 1944. Mullighan, Stuart, SX11541, was killed on 20 October 1942.

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1 '"LET NO MAN SURRENDER..."', *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 25 October 1954, p. 9.
2 AWM 52 8/3/36/34 – October 1942.
3 'El Alamein', *Cairns Post* (Qld), 11 March 1943, p. 4.
4 'BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN', *Balonne Beacon* (St George, Qld), 14 January 1943, p. 1. George Roberts, QX8704, was discharged on 7 June 1944.

5 ‘CONFIDENCE IN LETTERS FROM EGYPT’, *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers’ Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 25 November 1942, p. 3.

6 ‘OUR LONDON LETTER’, *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (Qld), 6 March 1947, p. 3.

7 ‘THE PUSH FROM ALAMEIN’, *The West Wyalong Advocate* (NSW), 28 January 1943, p. 1. Claude Kennedy, NX35944, was discharged on 5 October 1945; Joseph Mulcahy, NX28646, was discharged on 20 December 1945; William Williams, NX71537, was discharged on 10 March 1945.

8 ‘FROM THE FRONT’, *Camden News* (NSW), 14 January 1943, p. 3. Allan Evans, VX59531, was discharged on 25 August 1944.

9 ‘A.I.F. BREAK-THROUGH AT EL-ALAMEIN’, *Melton Express* (Vic.), 2 January 1943, p. 1.

10 ‘THE NOISE OF HUNDREDS OF GUNS’, *The Argus* (Melbourne), 13 February 1943, p. 7. Alan Benton, VX15740, was discharged on 1 September 1944.

11 ‘Soldier’s Views on Middle East’, *Advocate* (Burnie, Tas.), 31 March, p. 2. Victor Beecraft, NX34795, was killed on 4 September 1943.

12 ‘How A.I.F. routed Rommel’, *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 20 March 1943, p. 14. Donald Holmwood, WX196, was discharged on 11 February 1946.

13 ‘El Alamein’*, Cairns Post* (Qld), 11 March 1943, p. 4.

14 ‘How A.I.F. routed Rommel’, *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 20 March 1943, p. 14. Hedley Rosevear, SX8264, was discharged 6 October 1945.

15 ‘BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN’, *Balonne Beacon* (St George, Qld), 14 January 1943, p. 1.

16 ‘L.-CPL. E. G. PALMER WRITES HOME’, *Transcontinental* (Port Augusta, SA), 8 January 1943, p. 3. George Palmer, SX4005, was discharged on 4 September 1945.

17 Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, p. 132. Dulcie Thompson, SX11648, was discharged on 20 February 1946.

18 ‘Praise for the 9th Division’, *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, 6 February 1943, p. 10. Victor Rae, NX50437, was discharged on 30 October 1945.

19 ‘Australians in Battle’, *Westralian Worker* (Perth), 15 January 1943, p. 3. William Lonnie, WX10089, was discharged on 16 January 1946.

20 ‘HOW VC WAS WON BY WA SOLDER’, *The Argus* (Melbourne), 30 January 1943, p. 8; ‘Mother Of VC Has Made 70 Nets’, *The Daily News* (Perth, WA), 29 January, p. 2. Percival ‘Percy’ Gratwick, WX10426, was killed in action on 26 Oct 1942; https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/stories/biographies/percival-eric-gratwick/

21 ‘HOW CPL. ALBRECHT WON THE D.C.M.’, *Murray Pioneer* (Renmark, SA), 15 April 1943, p. 1. Kingsley Albrecht, SX7830, was discharged on 10 May 1944.

22 Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, pp. 176–177.

23 ‘Artillery Barrage: Biggest Seen In Desert’, *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers’ Advocate* (Parramatta, NSW), 16 December 1942, p. 2.

24 ‘A.I.F. BREAK-THROUGH AT EL-ALAMEIN’, *Melton Express* (Vic.), 2 January 1943, p. 1.

25 https://www.anzacmemorial.nsw.gov.au/our-stories/our-stories/australians-and-battles-el-alamein-1942

26 ‘Family Had Cable From V.C. Winner On Day He Was Killed’, *The Mail* (Adelaide), 30 January 1943, p. 2. William Kibby, SX7089, was killed in action on 31 October 1942. Thomas Martin, SX8370, was discharged on 2 August 1945.

27 ‘THE LATE SGT. W.H. KIBBY, V.C.’, *Murray Pioneer* (Renmark, SA), 25 February 1943, p. 5.

28 ‘Inspiration Of Sgt. Kibby’, *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), 4 March 1943, p. 2. Clifford Thompson, SX4650, was discharged on 13 November 1945.

29 ‘Fighting is Fun To S.A. Hero’, *News* (Adelaide), 29 November 1942, p. 6; ‘DIDN’T WARRANT VC, SAYS SA HERO’, *The Telegraph* (Brisbane), 24 March 1943, p. 2. AWM 2022.6.141, Wallet 1 of 1 – Citation for the DCM awarded to Sergeant Thomas Currie Derrick, 1942–1943; AWM 2022.6.144, PR82/190.

30 ‘145 S.A. MEN PRISONERS’, *News* (Adelaide), 16 November 1942, p. 6; ‘Soldiers’ Graphic Stories Of El Alamein Battle’, *News* (Adelaide), 25 February, p. 3. Jack Abraham, SX8280, was discharged on 9 December 1943.

31 NAA: B883, SX8280; ‘Civvy Street in 11 Other S.A. Towns’, *The Mail* (Adelaide), 1 February 1947, p. 5.

32 ‘SOLDIER’S LETTER’, *The Manning River Times and Advocate for the Northern Coast Districts of New South Wales* (Taree, NSW), 6 January 1943, p. 4. Dudley McCaffrey, NX67383, was discharged on 7 January 1946.

33 ‘Turning Point?’, *The Mercury* (Hobart), 30 December 1942, p. 3.

34 Johnston & Stanley, *Alamein*, p. 235. Eric Lambert, NX31349, was discharged on 7 December 1945.

35 Serle, *The Second Twenty-Fourth Australian Infantry Battalion of the 9th Australian Division*, p. 222; Johnston & Stanley, *Alamein*, p. 232.

36 Letter supplied to author by Keith Windlow. Les Windlow, VX28757, was killed in action on 31 October 1942. Frederick Porter, VX48162, was discharged on 18 February 1946.

37 Johnston & Stanley, *Alamein*, pp. 242–243.

38 AWM 52 8/3/28/26 – June–August 1942. John Carey, QX11070, was discharged on 4 October 1945.

39 ‘THE NOISE OF HUNDREDS OF GUNS’, *The Argus* (Melbourne), 13 February 1942, p. 7.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID MITCHELHILL-GREEN is a freelance historian and photographer. A graduate of Monash University (Melbourne), his Master's thesis examined the sieges of Tobruk during the Second World War. His earlier writings for the UK magazine *After the Battle* led to global travels exploring and documenting former battlefields, including El Alamein, where he followed in the footsteps of the Desert Diggers. Several years teaching in Japan led to an interest in the country's history and architecture during the feudal era and the co-authoring of Castles of the Samurai (2003) and Samurai Castles (2018). In 2021, David was awarded the RAAF Heritage Prize for Literature for his manuscript on the Cold War in Malaya.

David's books include *Desert Diggers: Writings from a War Zone 'Somewhere in the Middle East' 1940-1942* (2024), *Wings Over Malayan Jungle* (2024), *The Kaiser's Panzers* (2024), *Tobruk: Fiercely Stand or Fighting Fall* (2021), *Hitler's War in Africa 1941–1942* (2021), *Air War Over North Africa* (2019) *and Fighting in Ukraine: A Photographer at War* (2016).

David lives in Melbourne, Australia and enjoys escaping to the Victorian High Country to write.

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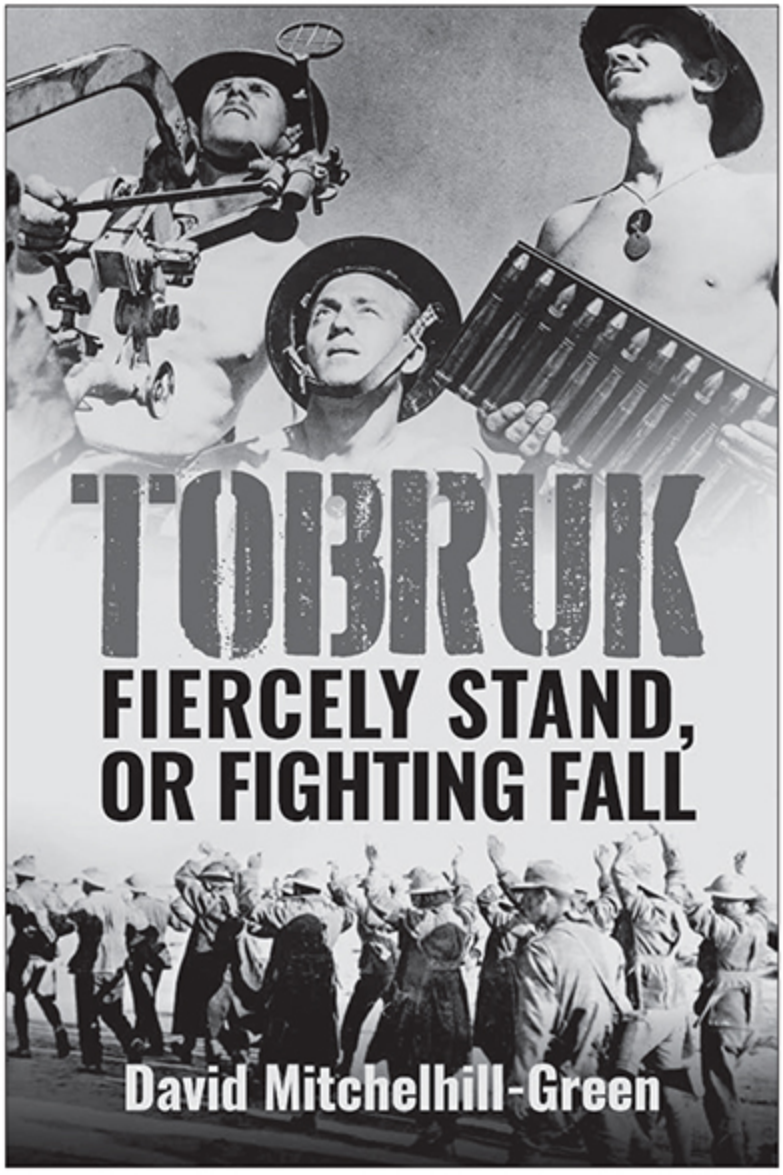

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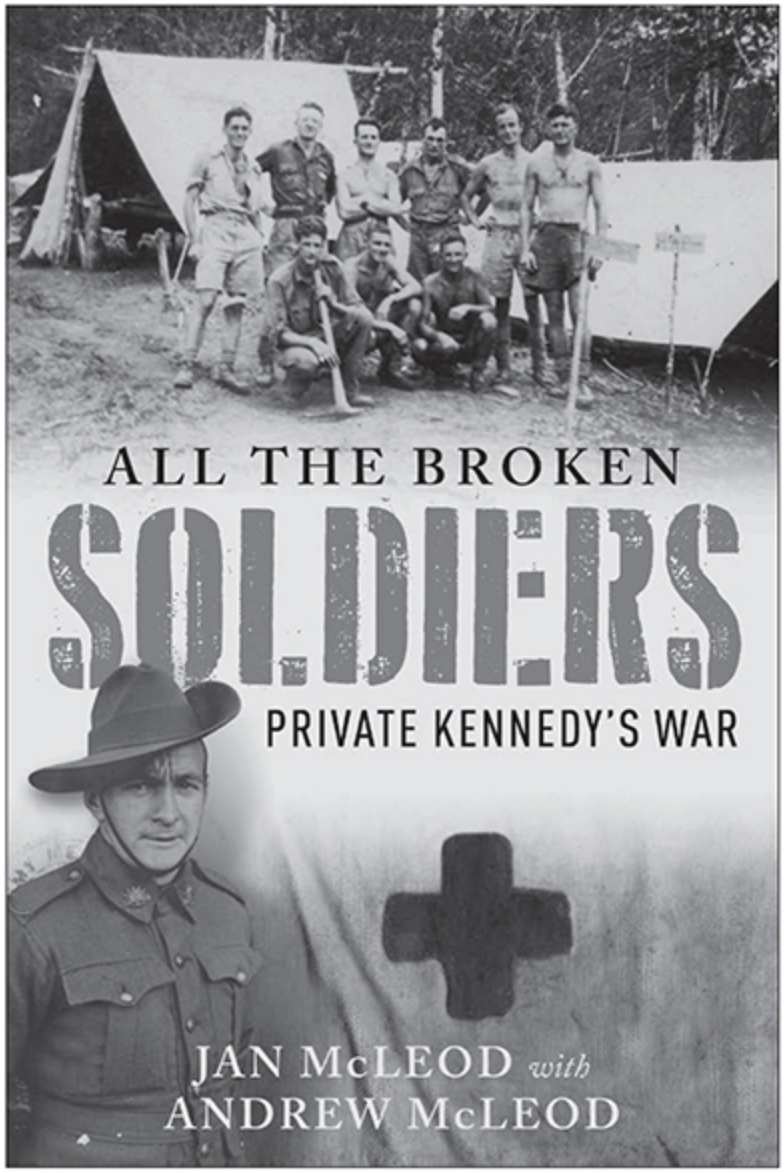

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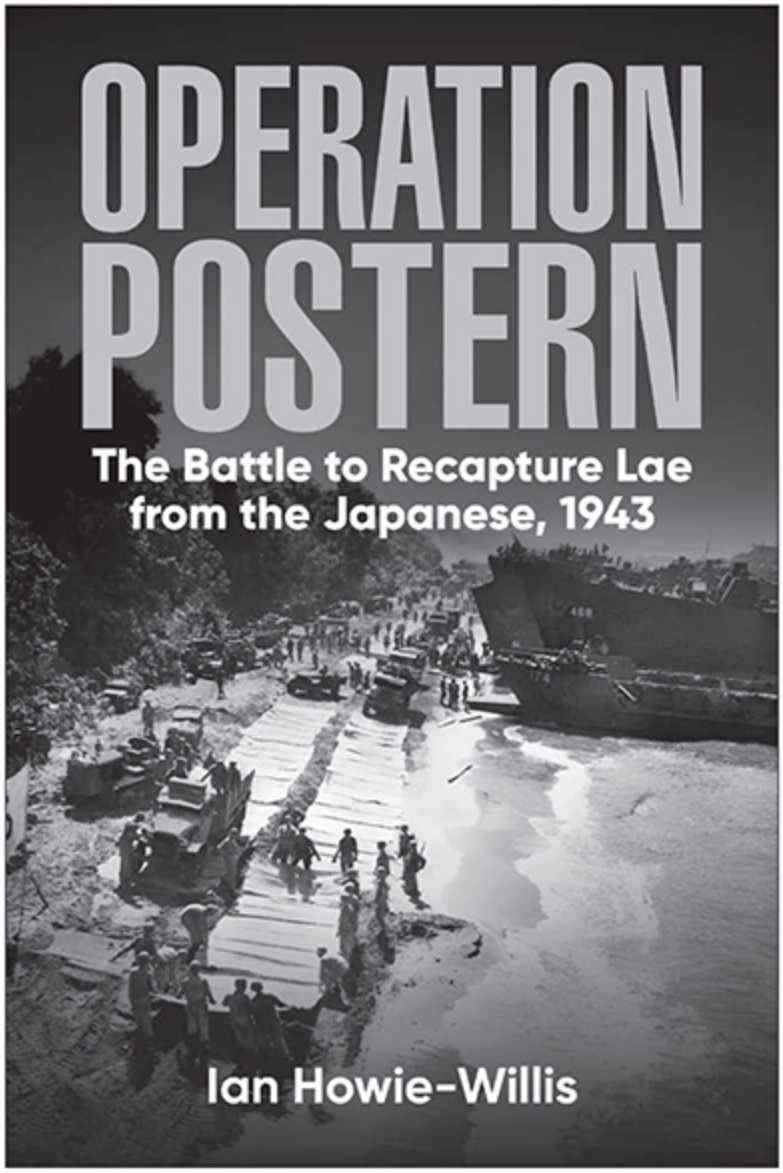

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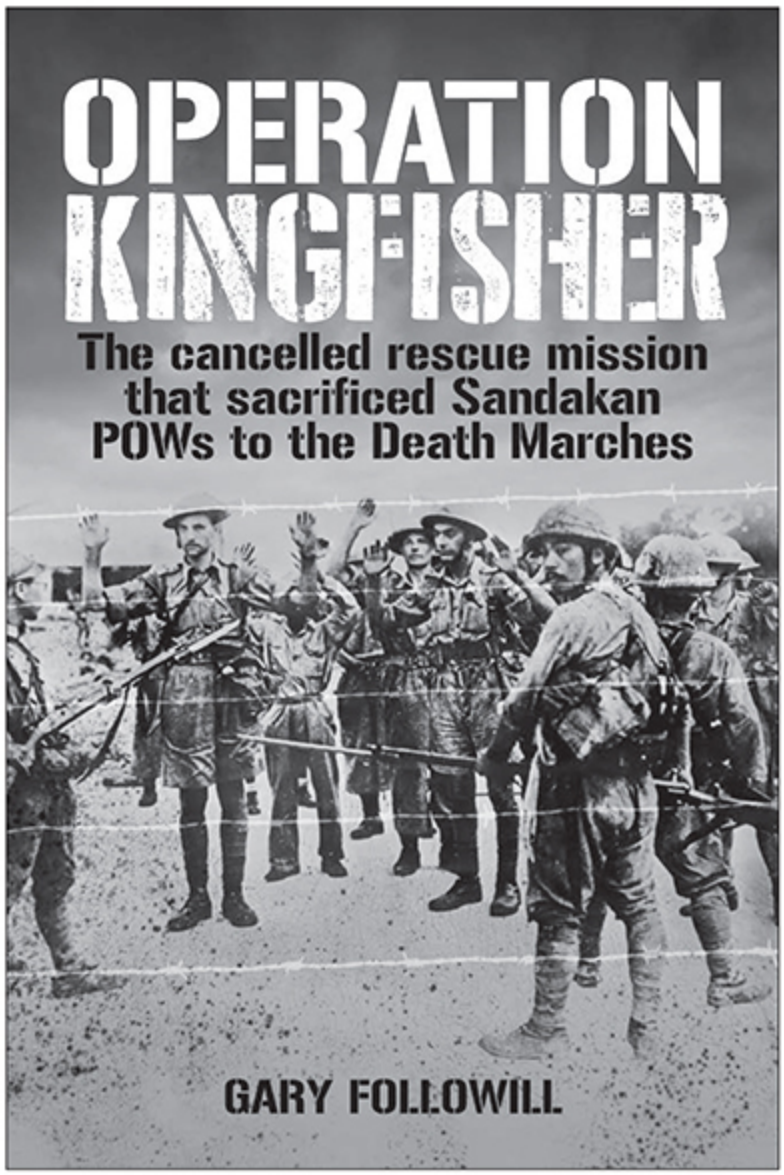
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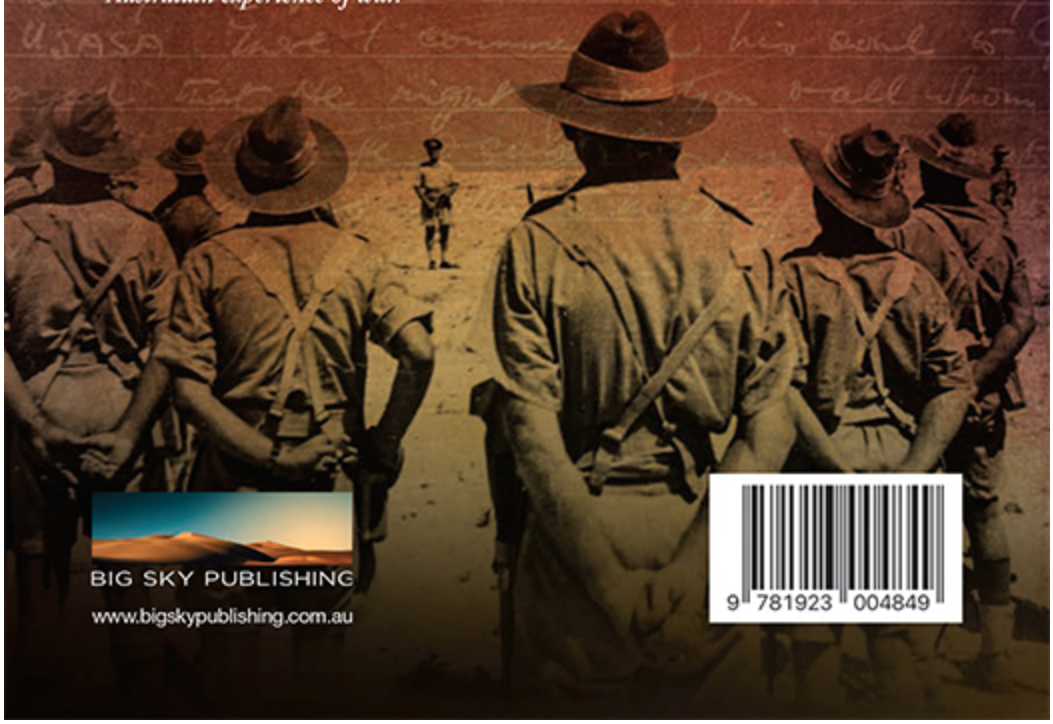

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